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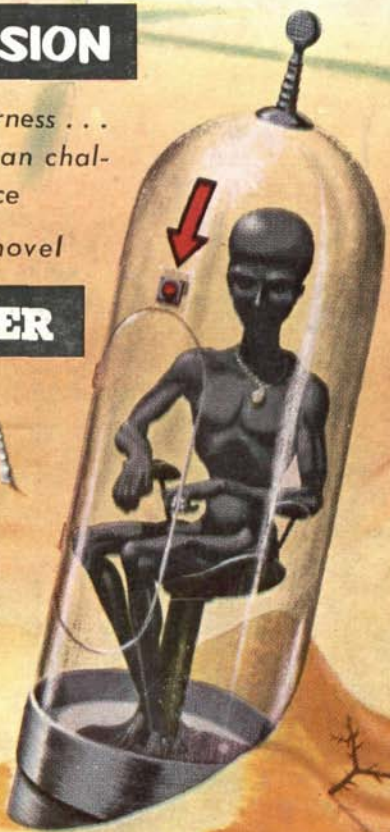
By MURRAY LEINSTER



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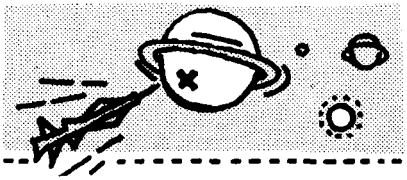

Prophecy is always a risky undertaking and every time we indulge in it we have the uncomfortable feeling that we may be putting our head on the chopping block. But there's a force outside ourselves—as the now famous Duke University experiments in extrasensory perception have demonstrated—which seems at times to leave us no choice. Prophetic thoughts leap unbidden into the human mind and—Well, it may be clairvoyance or the ability to see events before they happen or something of the sort. Or it may be something quite different. But whatever it is, we find ourselves making statements whose full significance only becomes apparent months or years later.

For example—in the second issue of SATELLITE we wrote, in what we thought was a somewhat whimsical flight of fanciful rejoicing: *"The second man-made Satellite is hereby launched on its globe circling orbit. Flashing through the star-studded heavens, her outer shell brilliantly burnished for easy recognition, the bulk of her instruments focussed on"*—and so on for a paragraph or two.

Prophetic? Well, what do you think? Doesn't it read very much like recent newspaper headline statements ushering in the Earth satellite era? Can its prophetic implications be dismissed as a mere coincidence?

Somehow we do not think so. That ESP force must have really jolted us, subconsciously, and brought forth the statement despite our complete lack of positive knowledge at the time concerning events which were still a good many months in the future. And now we're wondering if *Murray Leinster* might not be a prophet, too—in the breathtakingly unusual and exciting THE STRANGE INVASION we're running complete in this issue.

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SATELLITE
science fiction

APRIL, 1958 Vol. 2, No. 4

A COMPLETE NOVEL

THE STRANGE INVASION

by MURRAY LEINSTER

The Gizmo Invasion was unique in space and time. Not even the dawn of the Atomic Age with its Earth satellite sequel had stirred men more profoundly, or posed a greater challenge.

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SATELLITE SCIENCE FICTION, Vol. 2, No. 4. Published bi-monthly by Renown Publications, Inc., 501 Fifth Avenue, N. Y. 17. Subscriptions, 6 issues $2.00; 12 issues $4.00; single copies 35¢. Entered as second class matter at the post office, New York, N. Y. Additional entry at Concord, N. H. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious.

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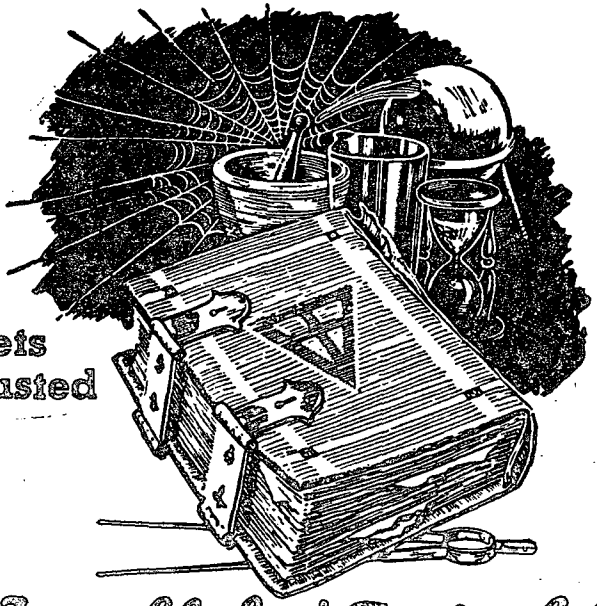

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A COMPLETE NEW SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

THE STRANGE

by MURRAY LEINSTER

It was the deadliest kind of biological invasion . . . because the Gizmos seemed indestructible and were not even animals in a strict sense. They lived only to kill . . .

Prologue

THE FIRST BATTLES of the war with the Gizmos took place in deep wilderness, and human beings knew nothing about them. In the beginning, cities were not attacked. The initial skirmishes were fought by bears and wildcats and mountain sheep, and other creatures blood-kin to men. Those battles were often magnificent, but they were usually disastrous, and few of them were even reported.

There was, though, a bear found dead in the high Sierras, killed after a fight of epic proportions, as was shown by torn-up earth and crushed brushwood and toppled saplings. There was a mountain lion found slain in Colorado after a conflict no less desperate. A slaughtered wildcat's furious struggle for life came under shocked and incredulous game warden scrutiny in northern Michigan, where the signs of the conflict were clear. And a fisherman on a stream in Pennsylvania saw

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INVASION

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the death of a four-point buck. It fought with splendid courage. It used horns and hooves and pure desperation against an invisible antagonist, but it finally sank to the ground and died while the angler looked on, appalled and unbelieving.

These were battles with Gizmos. All of them. The signs were unmistakable. The dead creatures had not a wound or a mark on them. The battlegrounds showed their tracks plainly, but no trace of the thing or things with which they had fought. In one case, as has been noted, a man saw the fighting. But he did not see the buck's antagonist. He only saw the buck-deer die. Its killer could not possibly have been anything but a Gizmo.

No point would be served, now, in reviewing the controversy about the Gizmos' origin. Some still insist that they came from outer space. This is hard to believe, because a space-vessel under Gizmo control would be almost impossible to imagine. Some authorities consider that Gizmos are native to Earth, having been originally evolved here and were always here. They point to primitive fears of evil spirits as proof of their presence on Earth since time immemorial. But the objection to this hypothesis is that primitive man could not have survived had he been attacked by the Gizmos who made war on us.

In effect, it seems almost indisputable that since our ancestors were *not* exterminated by Gizmos, there were no Gizmos in ancient days. Yet the legends of fiends and *djinns* and *efrits* and *ghuls,* and of eerie inhabitants of remote places—these age-old tales are singularly convincing, once one considers them in connection with Gizmos.

These days we believe only in highly scientific things. Scientific opinions change continually, and so do our familiar, everyday conceptions of what is possible in nature. But Gizmos were not flesh and blood, and therefore they were not scientific, and so we would not notice such signs of their presence as must have existed before the war.

So however they appeared, they were able to marshal their forces without interference. They established bases in our forests, pickets in our woodlots, and observation-posts in the parks of towns and cities. Gizmo patrols moved wherever they pleased without anybody crediting their reality—even when they committed atrocities. They had every possible advantage in their preparations for war.

Even the word "Gizmo" was a slang term applied to blips on radar-screens for which no cause could be established. It was known that these blips were not caused by solid objects. They moved in-

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dependently of the wind, and some radar-stations observed many of them, and others very few. There was one flying-saucer scare, for instance, more newsworthy than the majority of such sightings, when six unidentified flying objects were reported over Washington, D.C. Armed forces radar-stations admitted reluctantly that the blips had been unusual. But, were only gizmos, using the term in its original "blip" connotation. It was guessed that they were areas of excessive ionization in the air, and were dismissed as of no importance whatever, or were simply ignored in official reports.

This proved to be the error of the century, but it was a very natural one. A Gizmo had been spotted by radar over a flying field in Texas. It hung stationary over the center of the installation at fifteen hundred feet, as if leisurely surveying the activities below. Nothing was visible where the radar insisted the Gizmo was. A plane took off and, guided by instructions from the ground, dived squarely through the space occupied by the Gizmo. Neither the plane nor its piolot detected anything at the moment of impact. The Gizmo vanished. So evanescent was the phenomenon that it seemed reasonable to disregard Gizmos altogether and discourage all speculation concerning them.

And that, as things turned out, was a catastrophic blunder.

I

DICK LANE was the first man to be attacked by Gizmos—it was undoubtedly a small patrol—and to live to tell about it in intelligible terms. It happened on a certain day when he trudged a dim trail through mixed mountain laurel and pin-oaks and pine-trees on the downward slope of a mountain nobody had ever bothered to name. This was in the Appalachians of western Virginia, some ten miles from Murfree's Court House, where later events were to take a grim turn.

Lane had been in other places on the same important errand, and his bafflement had been as great as here. Which meant, quite simply, that his frustration was complete. He'd been tracking down stories of inexplicable deaths of game animals, and some suspected deaths of men. So far he'd learned nothing tangible. He'd had dark suspicions, but nothing to justify them, and on this hot summer afternoon he was discouraged and uneasy and depressed.

To a sportsman, and, more specifically, a professional writer about field sports like Lane, the matter was profoundly mystifying and disturbing. To the rest of the world it was not. But fishermen and hunters made much of good hunting dogs who'd gone apparently crazy—not mad—and fought

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empty air, snapping at it while screaming terrifiedly.

Often the dogs died. And there was a pheasant-hunter in New Jersey, the previous Fall, who had been found dead beside his dead dog in the center of a patch of brush that had been levelled in some sort of frenzy. Neither man nor dog bore any marks of violence. Something unknown was taking toll of game and hunting-dogs, and it looked as if there were too many extremely puzzling deaths of people, in remote places.

Lane was a professional sports writer. His search for material took him to places where there was good hunting and fishing, and most of his articles were contracted for, and appeared in the magazine *Field and Forest*. Before this recent spate of murders in the wilderness he had enjoyed his magazine assignments. But Lane was a sportsman before he was a writer, and he was upset by the destruction of game—not for food, apparently, but by a cruel and wanton killer who left slain animals to rot after they had defended themselves gallantly.

Forest and Field had taken note of the matter, but as it was a sportsman's magazine soley it had been less profoundly moved by a report that a ten-year-old boy had been found suffocated in Euclid Park, in Cleveland, and by the equally mystifying death of two children picking blackberries on the outskirts of Englewood, New Jersey. Yet it was Lane and his fellow-sportsmen who insisted that what was happening to wild creatures and good hunting-dogs needed looking into. So as a public service *Forest and Field* had commissioned him to find out what was going on. He'd been at it for quite some time now—with no tangible results.

The sun was almost directly overhead as he trudged along a sloping mountain trail without expectation of increasing his entirely negligible store of positive information.

He'd come to Murfree County because here the reports had been especially persistent and detailed. There'd been a case only ten days before. A farmer's cattle had stampeded insanely in the middle of the night. They had fought frenziedly in their stalls, breaking down the walls of the barn, crashing through the barnyard fence and fleeing in wild terror through the night.

Eight animals escaped from the farm. Next morning six of them were rounded up and returned. The other two had fallen dead without a mark on them. There were also local reports of dead foxes and wild turkeys and raccoons and opossums. Something was killing a lot of game in Murfree County.

Lane had asked questions and searched for clues here as in other

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places. He had found nothing. It was mysterious. It was baffling. It was frustrating.

This afternoon, then, found him making his way on foot to ask questions at the last place in Murfree County where he could hope to find anything new. There was a field biological expedition in the county just then. It was sponsored by Gale University, and the local citizens had not failed to slander it in a jesting way by insisting that it was studying turkey-buzzards. The woman professor in charge had not greatly impressed Lane's informants. They had taken pains to point out that she wore pants all the time, and what was worse, hadn't the build for it. So Lane was doggedly on his way, to ask if the expedition had made any observations that might bear on his affair.

The day was singularly perfect. All about him the excessively tumbled mountain-country seemed to bake quietly underneath the sun. The mountains themselves were dark green under a totally blue sky. There had been rain the night before and brooks sang merrily, but the sunshine breaking through the leaves was startlingly hot.

Presently he saw the glint of metal in the distance. That would be the expedition's trailer, beyond a doubt. It vanished behind a spur of stone as he went on, partly downhill, and partly at an angle along the mountain's flank. Presently the ground leveled off, and he came to the tiniest of natural clearings, filled with tall grass. He saw a glint of gray fur in the center of it.

The world seemed very still, just then. There was next to no air movement and no birds sang. Lane did not consciously note the fact, but there were not even insect-noises in the air. No gnats or mosquitoes hummed around him. He could tell that a vast gulf dropped away to his left, and that to the right the ground sloped up to a smooth stretch of level ground. Above him was dense, depressing forest, whose trees were gnarled and crooked because of the rocky ground. But in the clearing it was baking hot.

He felt no uneasiness, no actual premonition, however, as he moved toward the bit of fur. There was a vast stillness everywhere. Had it been night-time, the silence would have been appalling. But Lane heard the rustling of grass about his feet, and it did not occur to him that the complete, unnatural absence of all visible movement was ominous.

Something invisible touched his face. Again, in darkness this would have been horrifying. But the sun was bright. He brushed the air before him. It felt like a thread of gossamer floating in the sunshine. It came again. He brushed impatiently, staring down

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at his feet. The sight, considering what he'd been working on, was almost familiar. But it was far from gratifying.

There were twenty or thirty dead rabbits in an untidy mass, lying on the ground. They had been dead for days, but no carrion flies hovered about them. Neither were there any brilliantly-colored butterflies fluttering above the small corpses. They had not been touched by buzzards. It abruptly occurred to Lane that the total absence of all scavenger activity was remarkable.

He raised his head. The thing he mistook for gossamer touched him a third time. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. He stirred one of the dead rabbits with his foot.

He heard a faint whining sound he could not identify. The rabbits were dead. That was all. There were no wounds. He stirred another small carcass. Discoveries like this had been made before . . .

Eerie, delicate fumblings on his brow, his cheek. Lane wiped his face again with his handkerchief. He stared down at the small dead creatures. It is not natural for rabbits to gather in so close an assembly, especially to die. There is no natural enemy of rabbits which rounds them up to murder them. But much more startling was his just-previous observation. These little furry bodies had received no attention from blue-bottle flies and sexton-beetles and such things, whose function it is to keep the wilderness sweet smelling and tidy. Nothing had touched these small corpses at all.

Then it occurred to Lane, startlingly, that there was no death taint in the air. He puzzled over that. The gossamer touches stopped.

Something closed smotheringly over his face. It sealed his nostrils and his lips. His forehead was touched by something which pressed against it—gently, but insistently. The contact was all over his face and throat together, as if he were enmeshed in invisible cobwebs.

The whining sound he'd heard was sharply distinct. And then—

He couldn't breathe.

He gasped, or tried to. No sound came. Blind panic took possession of him. But one cannot succumb wholly to panic when blankly amazed. Lane stood utterly motionless for an instant, desperately trying to fill his lungs with air. He could breathe out. He could exhale. But he could not breathe in. Air would not enter his nostrils and something invisible blanketed his face. He could feel it, though it was neither warm nor cold. He could not breathe through it. He was suffocating in a quite horrible way.

He found himself staggering. He was dazed. He could not

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draw even a shallow breath. He beat the air before him. He went stumbling and lurching across the clearing, his only conscious purpose that of breathing in, which had become impossible.

He crashed into brushwood, tripped and fell headlong. His face buried itself in fallen leaves, —and here, at last, he could breathe! He drew the air deep into his lungs—air scented with acrid woodsmould and the odor of dry foliage.

He struggled up on hands and knees—and his breath was choked off again. Something blanketed his face for the second time. It sealed his lips and nose. He fought, crashing back into the brushwood tangle.

And again he could breathe.

He lay still, panting, with his face buried in the fallen stuff. An incredible surmise began to form. He felt more fumblings on his neck and ears. Delicate touches which made his spine crawl. There was something which wanted him to lift his face so that it could stop his breath.

But he was alone!

Despite the shock of near-strangulation, Lane was filled with a sort of blank astonishment. He lay still, and a nameless something fumbled at him, and he knew that it wanted him to look up, to stand up, to rise.

It whined impatiently for him to stir. He knew that it wanted to kill him, and that he could frustrate it in only one way—by keeping his face buried in dead leaves. It was an invisible thing, and it did not bite or claw or sting. But it fretted because he did not stand up to be suffocated.

Sweat poured out all over him. This was the killer of the wilderness.

The touches stopped.

He lay still, unnerved past the possibility of relaxation. Now, for the first time, he realized the significance of the unnatural stillness of the world about him. It was horrifying, that quietude. He strained his ears for sounds of movement from the thing which only a moment before had been whining beside his ear. He heard nothing at all. No . . . Very, very faintly he heard the bubbling of a brook somewhere nearby.

A very long time later he moved cautiously. There was still no bird-call or insect hum or stridulation. There was no sound at all but the small rustlings his own body made as he moved in the brushwood.

He sat up and searched the clearing. his lips drained of all color. He had the hair-raising conviction that if a man had come into the clearing at the moment of his greatest peril and seen him beating the air and stumbling to a fall, it would have looked very much like the incident in which a fisherman had seen a four-point

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buck fight nothingness—to the death.

But he could breathe.

Presently, reassured, he stood up. He held double handfuls of dried leaves before his nostrils, and breathed through them. The smell of woodsmould was strong. He waited, trembling, gripped by desperation, his reassurance ebbing away. He was known to be afoot and moving, by whatever meant to kill him. He could not hope to slip away unperceived. But nothing happened, and after a long time he dared to move onward down the hillside.

A mile away, he was still shaken. Two miles away, he began to breathe more freely again. But he hadn't fully recovered his normal coloring when he came out upon a shelving slope and saw the aluminum trailer marked *Gale University, Field Equipment* in stencilled letters on its sides.

It was less than two hundred feet away. It glittered in the bright sunshine and beyond it the valley spread out, its trees stirring in a light breeze, and all the world very beautiful and serene.

He moved on, and saw something else. There was a curious, foot-high construction of wire screening on the ground, and directly beneath it a woman of ample contours in riding-breeches lay at full length, squinting through one surface of wire mesh to the other. As Lane drew near, he heard a contralto voice protesting about something in startlingly profane terms. Then he saw that the woman was reading a book.

He coughed, and she raised her head to stare at him. He had no doubt as to who she was.

"My name's Lane," he said shakily. "Dick Lane. I believe you're Professor Warren. Over in Murfree County House they told me I'd find you here, and that you might be able to help me. I have—well, a problem."

"It's not likely," said Professor Warren irritably. "But what is it?"

Lane told her who he was, and his connection with *Forest and Field,* and explained that he was trying to track down something that had an aspect of gruesome unreality about it. Game animals were being killed in clear violation of all the rules of sportsmanship. The slayings were wrapped in mystery. He had an extremely improbable idea about the matter. He hoped that as a biologist and a scientific observer she might have noticed something . . .

Professor Warren regarded him oddly. Then she pointed. "Is that the sort of thing you mean?"

He looked. There was a tiny, pitiful heap of draggled feathers lying just outside the fence, about a tiny skeleton with a sharp beak. There were eggs, befouled by rain.

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"A partridge," she said, "Dead on its nest."

Disturbed as he was, Lane found himself admiring Professor Warren. She was quite obviously a woman who noticed things.

"There are half a dozen others like that," she went on, regarding him with an intent expression, "within a quarter of a mile. It struck me as strange."

She looked at his hands. Lane realized that he was still gripping the clumps of dead leaves he'd held before his face when leaving the clearing. He tossed them to the ground and said awkwardly, "I had a good reason for collecting those—just now. But I suppose I look like a lunatic."

Professor Warren grunted inelegantly. "Not quite," she observed. "Of course, holding a kind of funeral wreath while introducing one's self isn't a normal way of winning friends and influencing people. But I never heard of a lunatic who thought his actions strange. You do. And if you're concerned with wild-life you may be able to help me. I've been having some trouble with buzzards . . . This business is part of it," she added dourly, with a wave of her hand toward the enigmatic arrangement of copper screen-wire. "Come down to the trailer and have some coffee. What do you know about the manners and customs of buzzards?"

"Very little," admitted Lane. He knew how they nested—in hollow stumps, mostly—and how they defended their nests against intruders. The way they used their beaks was hardly a pleasant subject.

"Come along," said Professor Warren. She strode briskly downhill, speaking over her shoulder. "I've been doing some research on intra-sensory substitution. Cases where one sense substitutes for another. Pit-vipers have a heat-nerve in their foreheads so they can detect the most trivial of temperature-variations, and so find warm-blooded prey in pitch darkness where their eyes can't work. That's heat-perception instead of light."

She was silent for an instant, still striding on ahead of him. Then she was talking again. "Bats feel obstacles with their ears. Buzzards have some superior substitute for smell. Put out a dead animal, even covered over with brushwood or in a pit where it can't be seen, and buzzards will come from everywhere, immediately. Even from up-wind! They couldn't possibly smell it up-wind!

"And when they arrive—why, then they try to find it with their noses! When the first buzzard comes down-wind to a bait that's barely cold, he doesn't smell it! He sees the odor. It's the only possible explanation. He simply has to be substituting some opera-

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tion of his optic nerves for the sense of smell. You see?"

Lane hardly heard. Two miles back, something had tried to kill him. He'd almost been a victim —like bears and deer and wildcats in other places, and, he suspected, like other men. He'd heard a whining sound, but had seen nothing. Even when a thing sealed off his breath, there'd been nothing to see! Yet it had happened. And there was a linkage of this impossibility to the murder of game animals everywhere.

"I was getting good results," said Professor Warren vexedly. "But about ten days ago the buzzards went temperamental on me! Now they float up aloft, looking for food, and I put out bait which ten days ago they'd have flocked to, and they ignore it! It's ridiculous! I've good proof that a pronounced reek of organic decay can be detected optically. But I have to check through buzzards painstakingly to secure even a small amount of convincing data. And there are dead chickens in a barn yonder—" she waved a large hand—"and the buzzards aren't interested! Temperament? Among buzzards? Or is it those damned dynamic systems I only halfway believe I've discovered?"

She turned to scowl at him. He'd stopped. He was staring at a mole—a gopher. It had burrowed up to the open air and died. It looked pathetic, a mere shapeless blob of fur with tiny, handlike pinkish claws protruding from it. It was untouched by flies or beetles.

"That's been there for a week," she said, an embittered weariness in her voice.

"The buzzards," said Lane, "completely ignored some dead rabbits I passed. And no blowflies have been at this mole." He frowned. "I noticed particularly that there was no taint in the air where the rabbits were. But there was something else there—"

"What?"

"I think I know what happaned," said Lane slowly, "but I can't believe it. It's too crazy! And yet—it fits too well into what I asked you about to be dismissed as mere imagination on my part."

He stopped. Nobody on earth would believe—

"It's your privilege to be cautious," said Professor Warren. "But I don't mind making a fool of myself! It looks to me—mind you, it's no more than a guess—but it looks to me as if there are some gaseous dynamic systems operating around here in what ought to be good, healthy smells! Only they act like something more. They act like pseudo-living things. They could maintain themselves by oxydizing carbon monoxide and methane and the gases generally that are released by decay. There wouldn't be much energy, but

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they shoudn't need much. And I'm wondering if they're what's keeping my buzzards aloft. Dynamic systems, consuming the smells that buzzards ought to see!"

Then she added challengingly, "A smoke-ring is a dynamic system. So's a whirlpool. So is a rabbit. So are you! And if you have anything crazier to say than that, go ahead and say it!"

Lane stared at her for a moment in tight-lipped silence. Then he said, "What's happened to the flies around here? And the mosquitoes?"

"There's not a one," said Professor Warren. "That's queer! There aren't!"

She abruptly resumed her march toward the trailer. She was frowning.

When they were a hundred yards from the vehicle a dog came out from under it, and crept toward them. It was not a beautiful dog. It had started out to be a fox-hound and apparently had changed its mind on the way. Its tail drooped. It carried its head low, without spirit.

"That's The Monster," said Professor Warren briefly. "He's not ours. He belongs to a poor-white family that fled in terror—conjured up by something they imagined they saw last week. Local yokels who lived only to breathe. They performed no other useful act. The Monster stayed behind when they left. Probably because we feed him. I don't think they did."

The dog cringed a greeting. Professor Warren strode on past him.

"Wait a minute!" said Lane. "They fled from—what, precisely?"

"Nightmares," boomed the Professor. "They said things sat on their chests and prevented them from breathing. They spent their nights with their heads under the bed-covers. Two of their dogs and all their chickens died. Then their cow. Old age, probably! But they ran away whining of magic."

"Good God!" said Lane, stunned.

"Eh?" demanded the Professor, startled by his expression. "What's the matter?"

Lane was thinking furiously now. He put things together, and to his amazement they fitted. The result was impossible—but so were the facts.

"Your poor-white family," said Lane, "may very well have been wise and sensible people. I think I can tell you, after all—"

He did tell her, exactly, what happened to him. He knew better than to add details which might make his story more plausible.

"Now you know," he finished, "why I was carrying dead leaves when I spoke to you. It was the equivalent of having a sheet ready to pull over my head."

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Professor Warren said nothing for a full minute. But her voice, when she did speak, was the opposite of skeptical.

"Mr. Lane—that's the name, isn't it?—I am a desperate woman. I am just desperate enough to test this far from absurd story of yours—to test it boldly—in the hope of finding out why there has been an outbreak of artistic temperament among the local specimens of *Cathertes aura sepentrionalis*—buzzards to you, sir!

"I mentioned dynamic systems, and you've made it clear that the dead rabbits in the hollow where something tried to kill you did *not* taint the air. The combination is irresistible! You'll stay to dinner and tell me what you know."

She raised her voice. "Carol!' she called out. "Carol! We've got company!"

A door opened at one end of the giant aluminum trailer and a slender girl appeared, carrying a wicker bird-cage. Her face was troubled. Lane saw her with a sudden, extraordinary clarity. It was as if, somehow, he saw her and the mountains and the sky and valley besides, with much more than the customary vividness. Everybody can remember moments like that.

Lane had come a long way across the mountains, reviewing his own bafflement on the way. Then he'd had an experience which still made his flesh crawl in retrospect. He had been disturbed because he couldn't wholly believe what he remembered. But here and now the girl who had emerged from the trailer looked so completely as a girl should look, and seemed so remote from terror and bewilderment and unease that—well! He felt a surprised, deep gratitude that she was here to remind him that the world was good to live in. He regarded her with an astonished satisfaction, completely unaware that his intense stare was causing her embarrassment.

"Aunt Ann," she said uncomfortably, "I put Pogo outside in his cage because it's stuffy in the trailer. Then I looked out and didn't see him on his perch. I went to look, and he was lying on the bottom. There are feathers scattered everywhere. He must have beaten his wings wildly against the bars! He's dead!"

Professor Warren looked from her niece to Lane with startled eyes. "Pogo," she explained, "is our canary. Or was."

An instant later she said in a louder voice, "Too bad! I'll look him over . . . Carol, this is Dick Lane. He's having dinner with us. We're going to talk biology and dynamic systems. Mr. Lane, this is my niece Carol."

The girl looked down almost shyly for an instant, her brow furrowed. Then her eyes returned

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to Lane's face. She acknowledged the introduction with a nod.

"I have a firm conviction," said Professor Warren," that this young man is going to write a feature article that will perhaps get us both certified as insane. But nothing risked—nothing gained."

The Monster, the dog of no pedigree whatever, uttered a sound like a despairing scream. Then he snarled, facing empty air. It was unnatural and horrifying to see him bare his fangs at emptiness and then turn slowly, yelping, as if something unseeable was creeping toward him over the ground.

Suddenly he turned and bolted blindly, snapping at the emptiness about him. He dodged and twisted crazily, as he beat a hasty retreat, his ears flattened against his skull, his tail between his legs.

Lane felt all his muscles go rigid. Without any doubt, he knew that The Monster had heard faint whining sounds, and perhaps felt faint touches upon his fur.

"It followed me!" he said savagely. "Get inside! Fast! Get in the trailer!"

As Lane gestured frantically toward the vehicle The Monster rolled over, snapping, and then plunged crazily into the underbrush. For a moment he continued to yelp and scream indistinguishably, hiden by a tangled mass of briars. Then he scuttled out the far side of the briars and bolted desperately for the trailer. He flung himself through the opened door, almost upsetting Carol as she stood there.

"Inside!" urged Lane. "Quick! Before it follows! There's not a minute to lose!"

For an instant he thought he heard a faint, shrill venomous whine. He had all the feeling of horror he'd experienced back by the dead rabbits. But now he thought of wild life fighting hopelessly in the wilderness, of thousands of small corpses collected together in one spot. The sound of whining increased, as if it came from more than one source.

He thrust Professor Warren frantically before him as he ripped off his coat and flailed the air with it. Invisible or not, he would know if the garment touched anything.

II

INSIDE THE trailer, nothing happened. Lane went grimly through it, making sure there was no opening to the outer air. The ventilator above the small cookstove was open. He closed it, though he realized almost instantly that the result of these precautions would be stifling heat.

"Be still!" said Professor Warren in a strained voice, as she paced up and down the confined space of the trailer's living sec-

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tion. "I have to think things out. Either we're quite insane or the people who owned The Monster were far more sensible than we thought."

Carol sat motionless, looking from one to the other—her buxom aunt in khaki riding-breeches, and Lane seething in citified tweeds. Outside the trailer there was a rocky shelf which overlooked the entire valley to eastward.

"You've every reason to think me mad," said Lane harshly. "There was nothing but a few strange noises and the misbehavior of a dog to back up what I've said. But I believe it's absolutely necessary for us to remain tightly shut up like this—for the time being, anyhow."

"Those poor-whites," said Professor Warren, "pulled the bedclothing over their heads. I thought them stupid. But the devil of it is that they may have been right!"

Lane forced himself to sit down. He lit a cigarette.

"There was something that tried to strangle me," he said, with grim insistence. "And it whined while it did so. That's my excuse. I heard the same sound just outside, and the dog saw something."

"Or smelled something," interposed Professor Warren, "or heard it. A dog doesn't depend on his eyes. He's short sighted. He depends on his nose and his ears. They do the work his eyes can't. If there were dynamic systems such as I think I've found, and if they were what frightened him, why—they might smell or make a noise—"

"They make a noise," Lane told her. "But whatever attacked me and The Monster was invisible! And that's almost inconceivable. Real things can't be invisible!"

"I didn't say they were invisible," the Professor observed firmly. "What do you think I was trying to do with screen-wire set up on the two sides of a bit of buzzard-bait? I was trying to see what kept it from reeking to high heaven! Didn't you ever hold a match six inches from your nose, and look at the world through the hot gases above the flame? Things wabble and waver when you do.

"How do you think I made up my mind there were gaseous dynamic systems around here? When you look through one of them, things waver and wabble! The things you're talking about are just as invisible as the column of hot air above a match! Which means they're not easy to see, and you have to know what to look for. But they can be seen!"

"Then what tried to kill me?"

"A dynamic system," the Professor replied. "It had to be. A dynamic system is a parcel of matter using energy in a patterned way. A whirlwind's a dy-

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namic system. So is a gasoline engine—or a rabbit, or a man. Whatever attacked you and The Monster had to be a dynamic system because it used energy in a patterned fashion. The pattern happened to be a scheme for murder. What I have to figure out is—what more are these—these gizmos in addition to that."

"Then you believe I was attacked by a creature?" demanded Lane. "Not something inanimate, but something alive?"

"I saw the way The Monster behaved," said the Professor. "A dog does not snap at anything which is not alive. Look here! Blow a smoke ring."

Lane blinked. The Professor gestured impatiently. He blew a smoke-ring. It went slowly across the stifling-hot interior of the trailer, expanding as it went.

"That," said the Professor with authority," is a very simple dynamic system. It's a quantity of air which happens to have a toroidal motion. It isn't alive. It's only a vortex-ring. You can see it because the air of which it is composed happens to contain smoke. But a vortex-ring can exist in plain air just as well. Blow one." Lane felt foolish. "Go ahead!" insisted the Professor. "You can't see it, but it—"

Carol said in a queer voice, "Aunt Ann! Look at the smoke ring!"

The Professor blinked. Then she looked at the thin, drifting ring of smoke. It was deformed. It was bent on one side exactly as if it had struck something solid.

The Professor whooped. "That's it! There's one now! You can see the ceiling waver through it!"

There was a sudden motion of the air. The unseeable something which had deflected the smoke-ring moved. The tendrils of smoke wavered and curled through the space from which they had previously been barred.

"It's one of them!" exulted the Professor. "Right in here! But why doesn't The Monster give tongue? Fetch him out."

Lane dragged The Monster, cowering, from underneath a stool. He held the dog up. The animal panted and wriggled. He gave no sign of fright. His tongue lolled.

"If there's something here," said Lane," he doesn't smell it. And it can't be seen or he'd see it."

There were now flat layers of tobacco-smoke in the air, made visible by sunlight striking into the room through closed glass windows. There was no air-movement except the extremely slow general turn-over of air in a closed room. The smoke from Lane's cigarette had formed normally unnoticeable smoke strata on which sunshine smote, with a darker background behind them.

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Something passed swiftly through those tranquil layers of vapor, disturbing them. It was startling. It was unbelievable. Lane did not see any wavering of the background behind the moving whatever-it-was.

"Item!" said the Professor with satisfaction, "We have a good observation indicating that there are sometimes dynamic systems in air which can move through smoke-layers and disturb them. Perhaps we should provide ourselves with sheets to pull over our heads."

She beamed at Lane. He looked at Carol.

"It got in, probably when the dog did," he said grimly.

The Professor rubbed her hands. "Of course!" she said. "But we know how to keep it from harming any of us! I'm going to catch this specimen and find out a few things about it!"

Lane's eyes went back to Carol. She was watching all the interior of the trailer with steady, intent eyes—looking for waverings of the background which would indicate that something here or there was not quite like the rest of the air. She was pale, though. She was uneasy.

"If it's what we think, it's dangerous," Lane pointed out. "The first thing should be to get her away from this place. I feel responsible. I led the thing here."

The Professor went to a cupboard built into the wall of the trailer. She heaved at its contents. Folded sheets came out. She shook one open, lengthwise, and tossed it net-fashion to her niece. It spread out in the air.

The dog snarled. It cried out at the sheet, barking and snarling and yelping all at once, it's hackles rising. The Professor turned deathly pale. The sheet had fallen directly upon Carol, but only one edge reached to the floor. The other was caught up upon a stool, and there was a spot beneath where something writhed and squirmed and whined shrilly. That something was roughly cylindrical in shape and somewhat more than a foot in diameter. It was caught under the sheet, and seemed to be struggling furiously to escape. The dog went mad with terror. Its lips writhed back from its teeth and its entire body jerked and trembled convulsively as it continued to back away from the horrible shapelessness underneath the white cloth.

The sheet quivered along its entire length. The writhing, throbbing mass beneath began to fight its way toward the upraised edge that had been caught upon the stool. Suddenly the sheet sagged. Whatever had been trapped was trapped no longer. It seemed to Lane at that moment that the whining became a sound of maniacal fury. The dog dived out of sight and yelped wildly and the clashing of its teeth could be

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heard above the other, more appalling sound.

Carol made a convulsive movement. Her eyes were wide and terrified. Her mouth was open. She seemed to be struggling for breath. She beat at the air with her hands.

Lane plunged toward her, snatching up the cloth. He flung it completely over her head, and stepped back. The next instant purest horror filled him. The sheet did not fall naturally about Carol. It draped itself over her head, to be sure. But it enclosed something else. Something huge and invisible clung to her, whining and throbbing as it sealed her nostrils, her mouth.

Fighting down revulsion, Lane thrust out his hands. Something resistant and pulsating stirred his fingers through the cloth. He found her face—while she struggled—and gathered his hands together, scooping away the thing that clung to her. It filled a great part of the sheet. He clenched it tightly until he'd made the cloth into a bag whose neck he held fast. It was exactly like a rubber balloon imprisoned in the fabric sack. But no balloon ever fought against a cloth that held it, nor emitted a shrill sound that was somehow blood-curdling. Lane twisted the cloth, and twisted it, compressing the captured thing into a smaller and smaller space.

And suddenly there was nothing imprisoned in the cloth. It collapsed. And there was a carrion reek in the air.

Professor Warren was pounding on his shoulders. "Stop it! Stop it!" she cried furiously. Then she groaned in despair, turning from him. "Too late! You've killed it! We might have taken it alive—"

"I'm going to stamp on it," said Lane thickly. "I'll burn it—"

"Carol's all right." said the Professor. "And it's dead."

"I'm going to make sure," said Lane, his lips ashen.

Professor Warren shrugged her shoulders. The dog moaned and whimpered in its hiding-place. There was a sound outside the trailer now. It was a thin, high-pitched sound like a whine, but with a many-voiced depth to it. There was a rattling on the closed windows, too violent to have been made by the wind.

"How can I make sure the ghastly thing is dead?" demanded Lane, thickly. He still held the limp sack of cloth in a tight grip. But he was looking at Carol now. She had buried her face in her hands, and was trembling convulsively.

"If," said Professor Warren, as if addressing a child, "you took a jellyfish, and put it in a cloth bag and twisted until you'd wrung the creature out through the cloth, I don't think you'd be worried about whether it was dead or not. That's almost precisely what

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you've just done." She added with sudden vehemence, "It was alive, alive! It had a certain degree of intelligence. Perhaps a considerable degree. It's almost unbelievable! And yet—If you sniff you can't help knowing something about its metabolism! No wonder the buzzards were temperamental! There were no smells for them to see!"

She stood still a moment, her brows drawn together in thought, her face almost masklike in its rigidity. Then she moved to the other end of the living-space and struck a match. She put water on the small, bottled-gas stove.

"For coffee," she said. "It will help a bit. I'm going to make some notes while the water boils. Wildly imaginative, am I? A dynamic system of gases, unquestionably living because it has undetermined but demonstrable intelligence, emotional reactions, and at least some degree of communication with its fellows! We irritated it and it called the others while it attacked! There were others outside. Let 'em try to classify a gizmo like that! Just let them try."

She sat down and pulled out a notebook. She began to write, absorbedly and swiftly. The dog had not emerged from its hiding place.

"Don't worry!" said the Professor, as if aware of Lane's thoughts. The one you killed couldn't lift a sheet. The ones outside would never be able to turn over the trailer!"

Lane stared out a window, by no means completely reassured. He saw the blurred edge of the mountain's shadow cast on some of the isolated small fields below. Far, far out he observed a buzzard in leisurely and effortless flight. The tree-branches were stirring gently in the faintest of breezes. Under normal circumstances the air would have been filled with the triumphant stridulations of insects and the cries of birds.

But there was no sound now except the venomous shrill whining of creatures no man had yet seen with his eyes—a legion of small, deadly killers. They had killed bears and deer and wildcats, and foxes and turkeys, and cattle and chickens and dogs—and Lane was sure they had killed men. Now they dared to rage at human beings, as if mankind had become an obstacle they could no longer tolerate.

Carol stirred. He turned to her, shocked by her pallor.

"Are you all right?" he asked awkwardly.

She nodded, but seemed unable to control the trembling of her hands.

"Drink of water?"

She shook her head.

He sat down beside her. "We've got to find a better way of killing

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them," he said grimly. "And we will. You can be sure of that.

"We'll have to try fire," he added thoughtfully. "And there'll be odors they can't take. With the right kind of weapons we should be able to destroy the organization of the gas that gives them shape and substance."

"Yes, they can't be indestructible," she agreed. She hesitated a moment. "Fire might do. Aunt Ann believes they were responsible for the stories we tell to children—the myths and legends so many superstitious people still take seriously. Stories of will-o'-the-wisps and corpselights that float over swamps, shining faintly in the dark. They have been seen often enough, but nobody's ever caught one."

She paused, then said quickly, "Aunt Ann says they stay together like smoke-rings, only much, much longer. They must be much more complex than smoke-rings. They must use energy to keep themselves in existence. Aunt Ann thinks they may use the gases of decay, like will-o'-the-wisps are supposed to use marsh-gas to supply the energy they need to stay alive. If she's right, fire might bother them.

"Savages," she added, "cover their faces when they sleep. And it's rare they'll sleep without a fire going. Aunt Ann says they believe that ghosts and devils are afraid of fire. And that the—the things, learning that humans were usually protected, would have a tendency to ignore men and prey only on lower animals."

"Except," said Lane grimly, "they've probably found out recently we aren't savages and so aren't protected. They may have become more numerous in the past few years. Or a new and deadly kind may have evolved." He listened for a moment to the whining outside. "These things could well have started the tales of fiends and devils," he went on thoughtfully. "The old stories of medieval devils tearing people to bits. They don't actually wound animals, but their victims are always surrounded by destruction. The effect is one of ghastly, unnatural violence, pointing to a furious death struggle on the part of the victims."

Professor Warren closed her notebook and stood up. "Imaginative, am I?" she said. "Wait till I march into the biological department with some of these things trapped in jars! A gaseous organism with a gas metabolism! With sheets over our heads—"

Lane remained silent. He was remembering that the thing in the trailer had made no whining sound. It had acted as if guided by cunning, calling no attention to itself until it had been discovered by accident. Perhaps it had meant to wait until the occupants of the trailer were asleep. An attack in

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darkness and slumber could be irresistible. In short, the Gizmos might be cleverer than Professor Warren even suspected. The attempt to kill him had been shrewd, even after he had escaped the first assault by tumbling into a tangle of dried leaves.

"If you want to try sheets as a protection," he said shortly, "I'll go along with you. But frankly, I'm not sure we may not be taking a fearful risk.

Professor Warren tightened her lips. "How great a risk? Aren't you taking too much for granted. Before you got here the buzzards stopped coming to bait, because the gizmos were consuming the decay-gases. That has to mean the gizmos were here then. And what happened to the gnats and flies and mosquitoes? And the rabbits and the hen-quail on their nests? They were here *before* you came! One did attack us, true. But that particular gizmo attacked only after it was trapped. There must have been many others around before you got here!"

Lane said grimly, "That's part of my point. If these things gave birth to the medieval Satanic legends they must have the cunning of devils. And the first survival necessity for a devil in a modern world is that nobody shall believe in his existence. Now these things know that all three of us have become aware of their existence. To keep our knowledge concealed they have to kill us."

Professor Warren raised her eyebrows. "Are you suggesting they're as intelligent as men?"

"I'm afraid so," said Lane, as grimly as before. "If they were devils of medieval legend, they contrived deals by which they were worshipped and supplied with the smells of burned flesh. The old pagan deities—"

Professor Warren made a grimace. "Don't tell me I've discovered a pantheon! If they're intelligent, where's the evidence?"

"I've got an idea how to get it," said Lane. "If they haven't enough information to keep them from revealing themselves."

He gathered up the sheet which he had used with such deadly purposefulness a few moments before. He spread it carefully over one of the closed trailer windows. Carol saw what he was about, and came to help.

They draped both sides of the window, making sure that it would be completely covered by the closely-woven cloth. Lane knotted it at the corners, so that it would remain tight, but with a fullness in the center of the window-opening. He made use of that fullness to slide aside the pane. But he did not draw the pane completely back.

Nothing happened. The distinctly audible whining sound died the instant he began to fumble at the window. There was no sound

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at all—no birdcall or chirrup of insects. There was not even the whisper of wind among the trees of the mountainside. In bright sunshine, such unnatural stillness seemed singularly horrible.

The three of them waited, staring at the curiously draped window. Still nothing happened.

Lane shrugged. "I thought I'd provoke a mass attack by opening the window. If they were stupid, I thought one might try to poke inside. But if they were intelligent, I thought they'd try to storm the trailer in a rush we couldn't possibly handle. I was wrong on both counts."

Suddenly the dog yelped in terror. His hackles rising, he backed into the farthest corner of the living-space. He snarled and snapped at the window in a frenzy as he recoiled.

"You were right," said the Professor.

Something hit the draped cloth. It billowed out tautly. It almost seemed to stretch with the violence of massed Gizmos pushing against it. They tore and tugged at it, their whining filling the interior of the vehicle. It was unspeakably horrible.

Lane leaped toward the window. The sheet remained in one piece, but the tuggings and throbbings of the individually weak gizmos were loosening the cloth from the corners of the window-frame. One edge billowed momentarily and a vicious whine of triumph flashed past Lane. He heard Carol cry out.

He thrust back the barrier. He beat at the cloth with his fists, as if to destroy the yielding things by blows.

Carol cried out again, "Aunt Ann! Here! Come here!"

There were strugglings. The Monster screamed and snapped. It fought madly against unseeable nothingness. Another part of the cloth barrier bulged to its very edge.

III

PROFESSOR WARREN was chalky-white when the window was safely shut again and the two Gizmos which had got inside were destroyed.

Carol herself had killed one by the exact method Lane had used earlier—by plucking the invisible creature from its suffocating victim and forming a sack of cloth about it, then squeezing and tightening the cloth until there was nothing left inside the sheet to struggle.

The Professor had been the first one attacked. The second Gizmo she'd located by its raging whine and The Monster's snarls in its direction. She drove it by a lucky stroke of a whipping cloth into the flame of the bottled-gas stove. It died in that flame, itself a pale and lambent flicker of fire as its

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complex hydrocarbon gases burned out.

Now there was darkness in the world outside. Now there was silence again. The inside lights were on and Professor Warren sat weakly still. Carol had recovered much more quickly from a similar attempt to suffocate her. But a younger girl is always more resilient than an older woman. Professor Warren had had security and prestige and authority for so long that she was dazed by what had happened. That the attack upon her had been made by what she considered a biological specimen stunned her.

"It was—stupid of me," she said, in a trembling voice. "I couldn't really believe there was real danger. Even when Carol was attacked, you got the thing off her so swiftly that I failed to realize . . . I am a very stupid old woman. I thought of these horrors as laboratory specimens to be studied—nothing more."

"They're a great deal more," Lane told her. "They've been cagey, but I've reason to be sure they've killed people before."

"It's ghastly!" said the Professor, shuddering. "The only parallel I know to such a danger appearing suddenly is the appearance of rabies among bats in the Southern states. That's been taken care of. The public has been warned. But here—"

Carol said quietly, "That's not too good a parallel, Aunt Ann. Bats are commonplace animals and rabies is a deadly disease known to everyone. It had only to be proved that the two had somehow gotten together. This is more difficult. You have to prove that these hideous things *exist*. And people who've never encountered them are going to find it hard to believe."

"But they must believe" protested the Professor. "They really must! These things are dangerous, Carol! We have to give proper warnings, and there will have to be research to study their ecology and how to control their numbers, or else how to exterminate them quickly. There was an Australian parrot which suddenly developed the habit of pecking at sheep's backs until it got at their livers, which it ate. Thousands of sheep died. The whole species of parrots had to be wiped out. And there was a Rocky Mountain deer which became a reservoir of infection dangerous to men, and the whole species was destroyed."

"Those creatures were known," repeated Carol. "It was easy to prove they'd become dangerous. But Gizmos have been associated with the supernatural—with ghosts or spirits, and as such they're taken seriously only by the uneducated, the superstitious. Oh, there are a few intelligent believers in the supernatural, of course, but—"

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"I'll take care of that!" said the Professor. "Let me get to a long-distance telephone—"

"I'm afraid," said Lane, "that that's a problem. How do we get to a long-distance telephone?"

The Professor stared at him. "What do you mean?" Then she said angrily. "Are you actually trying to make me believe these creatures have—" She stopped short. She seemed to shrivel a little.

"If they're not too intelligent," said Lane, "we will probably be all right. They'll get tired of hanging around outside. But if they're really smart—I don't like the prospects."

He moved to a window. Night had descended over the valley now, and there were long shadows everywhere. He screened his eyes with his hand as he stared out into the moonlight. The dark mountain loomed gigantically against a star-studded sky. To the east and below there was a filmy, weaving night-mist which obscured the valley completely. There was absolute silence for a moment. But then, when he strained his ears, he heard the faintest possible whining. It was fainter than the humming of a mosquito, but he was quite sure that it wasn't an insect sound.

Lane turned away from the window, a coldness encircling his scalp. Carol searched his face.

"You say they've killed animals all over the country. Maybe someone else has found out what they are. It might be on a radio news broadcast."

Lane turned on the trailer's radio. The Murfree County mountains hinder television, and the instant burst of static did not surprise him. There was a humming and then the wailing last notes of a hillbilly ballad. A drawling announcer said, *"And that ends the Courdvine Boys program for today. This is—"* a burst of static—*"your friendly station in Danville. News follows in a moment."*

Lane felt relieved as he listened to a commercial for a familiar brand of fertilizer, delivered with a trite, bombastic flood of rhetoric.

Radar-stations all over the United States were reporting an extraordinary number of "Gizmos." Radar operators had adopted a word that could be applied to almost anything indefinite and indescribable, and attached it specifically to blips on radar-screens not caused by solid objects. Radar-screen gizmos were believed to be the basis of many flying-saucer stories. It had been guessed that they were actually areas of extra-high ionization in the air.

Professor Warren said shakily, "Gizmos . . .That's what I called these creatures. But—the term is a good one. If there's metabolism in gas, there has to be ionization!

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They could be talking about these horrors!"

She listened intently, but the discussion of Gizmos was quickly dropped. There was local news. A vegetable farmer had been found dead in his truck, ten miles out of Danville. Apparently he'd pulled off the road for a nap, and had never awakened. The windshield and side windows of the truck-cab had been shattered, the tires slashed to ribbons. Outside Pittsburg the bodies of two children, missing for a week, had been found. Apparently they had died of exposure shortly after their disappearance, though the weather was warm and there had been no rain.

Professor Warren said nothing.

The news ended. It was followed by a weather forecast, and then by a resumption of the hillbilly music.

"Gizmos," said Professor Warren in a bitter tone, as Lane turned off the music. "They're ionization in the air. But they are so much more! They are alive and they feed on the gases of decay. To use such gases for energy at less than flame-temperature there has to be ionization! I wonder what they'd say if I told them that their radio gizmos are living dynamic systems in gas? Probably what doctors said in Pasteur's day when it was suggested that diseases could be caused by germs!" She relapsed into silence.

Carol said quietly. "If they can't pass through sheeting . . ."

Outside the trailer the Gizmos waited. They were unseeable and more than ghostly in their tenuousness. They were very frail, in a way. A thousand of them, weighed in air, would hardly move the pointer of a scale. But they were very cunning and very deadly. They were also in very many places where their existence was unsuspected.

Lane and Carol discussed possible weapons and possible protections against the Gizmos who definitely had not gone away from the trailer. Professor Warren slept a troubled sleep on the bed. There was no thought of relaxation in the ordinary sense. The trailer was beleaguered by things which could not be seen at all unless one knew where to look and understood the significance of a very slight wavering and wabbling of the background behind them.

Presently Lane spoke coldly of the grisly possibilities if there were enough of them, and if they were as cunning and as persistent as they seemed to be. The air in the trailer seemed to grow stale. He thought of Carol and his concern and uneasiness increased. He felt that there was something he had not thought of which amounted to a near and present danger. It was as if he felt the

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presence of Gizmos where they shouldn't be.

He got up abruptly and went about the living-quarters end of the biological laboratory vehicle. He checked the doors, as if the Gizmos had strength to move them. He verified that the windows were tightly shut. He made certain that the ventilator above the stove had not been disturbed. Anything that a smoke-ring could pass through was suspect.

He found nothing wrong, but the hunch persisted. He could not believe that all was right. He went into the laboratory end of the trailer. He turned on the lights.

There were gossamer touches on his face. He dragged the door shut behind him, because it would have taken longer to close it if he'd passed through first. He dragged at his coat, shouting, "Carol! Professor! Watch out! Gizmos are *in!*"

A steady whining noise came into being all about him. He saw the laboratory clearly. It was neat. It was compact. It was the very pattern of a moveable biological laboratory for a field-trip investigation on such matters as intra-sensory substitution in *Cathertes aura sepentrionalis*—the common turkey-buzzard.

There was a camera mounted on a stand, with an extraordinarily long-focus lens attached to it. It could take a close-up picture from an incredible distance. It pointed at a small opening in the trailer wall. During travel, that opening was closed by an aluminum-faced cover. During the time when such a camera was in daily use, a cardboard shield covered it. The cardboard was one of those convenient makeshifts every field-trip party uses without thought.

Without thought. Because now the cardboard was toppled to the floor. Perhaps the moving of that cardboard by Gizmos was comparable to the shifting of a locomotive by the main strength of men. But it had been accomplished. The laboratory was filled with faintly whining things . . .

Lane leaned back against the door, frantically making sure that it was tightly shut. He inhaled, drawing the air deep into his lungs, and got his coat before his face. Then he shouted again to Carol and the Professor that the laboratory was full of Gizmos and they must not open the door.

He almost exulted in the rage that filled him, because he was wholly confident that now he knew how to handle the gas-beasts. He heard Carol, anxious and frightened. The Professor called out to him warningly, urging him to protect himself as he'd done by the dead rabbits.

Again he shouted through the muffling cloth. The Gizmos couldn't harm him through cloth. True, there were whining noises in his

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ears, and gossamer touches upon his forehead and his hair. But he glared above his wadded coat at the seemingly empty room.

He shouted again, confidently. He was going to attack the Gizmos with something he'd pick up and use like a flail. They could tack a sheet around the doorway. When he'd cleared the laboratory —or thought he had—he'd open the door, step into the space enclosed by the sheet, and close the door swiftly behind him again. It would be like an air-lock. If any surviving Gizmo should dare to enter the lock with him, it could be spotted and destroyed. Meanwhile he was safe. There was no hurry.

He stepped forward. He felt a stirring resistance, and his skin prickled. He flailed out with one arm, the other holding his coat before his face. Something gave. There was a horrid reek of carrion. He struck again.

Then he realized just how frightful his predicament was. He was not moving in free air, in which Gizmos floated. He was submerged in Gizmos which had replaced the air. There was no air except what was entrapped by his coat. He was in the situation of someone in a room half-smothered by rubber balloons filled with unbreathable gas. He could break the balloons, but he could not get air. There was no air. There were only Gizmos.

He began to fight blindly to break through the yielding, but implacable barrier about him. Laboratory apparatus crashed to the floor and he heard a window break. But still he could not breathe. He fought on in blind panic, in frenzied desperation, struggling now just to stay alive.

He fell, and something whined shrilly and then he could not even gasp in air that did him no good. Consciousness departed . . .

A long, long time later he was dully aware that he was still alive. He was outside the trailer, and there were stars overhead. But he could breathe. He heard Carol sobbing quietly. He stirred ever so faintly, and the Professor said, "Lie still now. Don't try to sit up too quickly. You'll be all right in a moment."

He did sit up then, despite her efforts to restrain him. He heard whinings, but nothing touched him. He said weakly, "What happened? I remember falling and then—"

"We've been taken prisoner by the Gizmos!" the Professor said, bleakly. "They're intelligent, and we're their prisoners. They haven't killed us yet only because we're something new! We're human beings who know they exist! So they're going to experiment with us! We're laboratory animals for these damned Gizmos to do research with!"

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IV

THE SITUATION, the atmosphere, and the facts were straight out of a more than usually unreasonable nightmare. There were bright stars overhead. Low on the horizon there was a gibbous moon, risen long after sunset. There were strained, contorted tree-shapes on the mountainside. There was the aluminum-bodied trailer, glittering on its moonward side, and abysmally black where it cast a shadow. And there was silence—almost.

Whinings sounded very close by Lane's ear, and his throat was so parched he could hardly swallow.

Carol, straining her eyes to see him, said swiftly, "That's a signal. A steady whine is when they're angry. But little whinings—mean they want us to do something."

Lane groaned wishing he could see her face clearly. "Well?"

"You've been unconscious a long time. We were sure you were dead. We've learned some things. They expect you to move away from them when they touch you."

There was an infinitely gentle touch at the back of Lane's neck. He said grimly, unmoving, "Something's touching me now."

"Obey it!" said Carol urgently. "Get up! Move!"

Lane said more grimly still, "The touch at the back of my neck was repeated—Why?"

"They're studying us," said Carol. "And Aunt Ann's studying them! We've got to find out what they want, how intelligent they are. How we can fool them or escape from them . . ."

"If they're studying us," said Lane shakily, "they're too intellig—"

His breath was cut off. He sat fiercely still, not trying to breathe. It was an impulse of defiance in the total absence of hope. By fiercely ignoring the thing that was attempting to suffocate him, he was deliberately inviting retaliation. But to a non-human creature the action would be baffling. And bafflement often led to a change of attitude. No lower animal, no bird or beast or insect, would react otherwise than directly to the stoppage of its breath. They would fight for air.

A Gizmo would gauge the vitality of a victim by the cessation of its attempts to breathe. So if Lane held his breath, to a Gizmo he would seem dead. Yet not dead either . . .

He sat utterly still, his hands clenched, cold sweat forming on his brow.

The blanketing thing moved away. He had not tried to breathe, and therefore the creature had seemingly decided it was not necessary to deprive him of air any longer. Yet—Lane gasped silently and drew pure air into his lungs. There were thin, elfin sounds in

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the night. Not whinings, these, but musical notes.

"I held my breath," he observed calmly, "and it went away."

Professor Warren said in a strained voice, "Splendid! But don't overwork it! Carol, you understand the trick?"

Carol said brittlely, "Something wants me to get up. I'm going to do it."

She rose, in the eerie light of the distorted moon. She moved forward. She stopped—and turned back.

Professor Warren's voice, strained as before, cried out in bitter protest. She was shaken with anger and humiliation. She was watching another human being obeying the orders of something which, because it was not human, was necessarily less than human. Her reaction was not reasonable, but it was inevitable.

"Damn them!" she said bitterly, "I can't be really sure whether they're actually studying us, as we'd study them with half a chance, or whether they're simply playing with us in cat-mouse fashion."

"Possibly both," said Lane, evenly. "Or it could be something else entirely. An animal doesn't think like a man."

"They're not animals!" retorted the Professor. "They're gas. They're not even protoplasm! How could they be animals?"

The singular, tense rigidity with which Carol obeyed the orders of invisible things ceased. She came back to the others, trembling.

"They let me go," she said shakily. "I hate them!"

"Carol!" said the Professor. "Did you understand the trick of holding your breath? A carnivorous animal keeps up its attack until its prey ceases to offer resistance to being eaten. These creatures aren't carnivorous. They're foetiverous—a good term. It would mean an eater of foul smells. They will keep up their attack until their victim is ready to decay. So when one stops trying to breathe—" She stopped, and inhaled deeply. She said, "I'm getting orders now. I shall try it."

She sat immobile. There was silence. The Professor was perhaps five yards from Lane, who sat with clenched hands in the moonlight in a world which made no sound at all.

Nor was there any movement. The Professor sat stony-still, while something whined faintly. Lane watched with burning eyes. Carol pressed her hand to her mouth, watching.

After an inordinately long time, the professor breathed again.

"It worked," she said unsteadily. "Now they'll talk that over and try to figure out how we can stop breathing and then start up

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again. At least I suppose they'll talk it over!"

Carol said, "When—when you stopped fighting, Dick, back in the trailer, we got desperate. So we put sheets over our heads, with holes for our eyes, and went into the laboratory to try to help you. We had a sheet to put over your head, too. But there were too many Gizmos. We could breathe, but they closed us in. They even got underneath the sheets, making that awful whine."

The Professor nodded. "They drowned us, stifled us, by keeping any air from getting to us. I collapsed, and Carol did, too—a moment later. Apparently they drew back and let us recover. I thought they'd gone away, satisfied that we were dead. We dragged you out to the open air. We heard no whinings. We tried to make you breathe again. But then they closed in on us once more . . ." She shuddered, sudden fury in her voice. "Three times, they stifled us! Three times they drew back before we were quite dead!" She added abruptly, "They had us, even in the trailer."

"I believe they did," agreed Lane slowly. "The way they got me, in the laboratory just now—" He stopped short. There were whinings at his ear. Something touched him. He said very grimly, "They knew I'm breathing again. I'm obeying this time, just to make it confusing."

He rose. He was urged forward, then halted by a touch on his forehead. He obeyed, while shame filled him that he had been forced to do their bidding to gain time. He stumbled and fell, and his hands touched dry grass among the tall grass-stalks. When he rose, he was stuffing the grass into his pockets.

"I'm prepared now," he said, as he allowed himself to be directed to the right. "I have a lighter. Gather dry stuff if you can."

He heard Carol stir, get to her feet. The Professor nodded in comprehension. She began to scrabble for dead grass, too.

Lane halted, in obedience to a touch on his forehead. He walked backward, at another touch. He was filled with humiliation. But he heard the rustling of dry straw being gathered.

"I'm wondering," he said tautly, "if they are trying to train us. They could be trying to panic us. They might want us to run and exhaust ourselves, to make our suffocation easier. If we're out of breath—"

Something sealed his nose and mouth. With a choking gasp he dropped to the ground. He lay with his nose against the earth, his arms moving out to gather straw.

There were no more touches. No more whines. It seemed as if the Gizmo which had been exercising him had contemptuously

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flung him to the ground. He shook with fury. But he gathered straw as he went back to the others.

"Here's my straw," he said briefly. "I've matches, too. Here. My lighter's dependable. But we haven't enough burnable stuff."

Carol crawled a little distance away. Lane heard additional rustlings. He stared up at the sky. Stars twinkled. Then he saw a star which wavered and wabbled without twinkling at all. Once he had seen that, he could perceive the distortion of the star-field in a nearly circular space. He was not surprised when the wavering moved. It was, in fact, a Gizmo.

"There is gasoline in the trailer," said the Professor. He heard her desperately at work in the tall grass about them. "It's for the light-generator. Two gallons."

"It'll help," said Lane.

They crawled, pulling dry grass. They gathered a small pile. It became a larger one. There were no more whinings. But there were muted fluting sounds in the air.

"They're talking us over," said the Professor. With a pile of straw before her, she grew vengeful. "What is the time?"

"Four," said Lane. "I think this straw will do. Better twist some for handling. I doubt they'll let us live to daybreak. There've been daylight killings, but usually—"

Professor Warren said with authority, "They'd hunt by night and feed by day, normally. The gases they feed on would naturally develop more markedly in hot sunshine."

There was a sort of choral moaning sound somewhere in the night. It could have been made by voices which ordinarily whined. It could have been a sudden sweep of wind among many branches. But it had too unearthly a quality to be anything so natural. It was somehow ghostly.

"That," said Lane," could be a decision—if they've been discussing us."

The three humans tensed. Lane twisted masses of straw into bundles whose farther ends were loose and frayed, but which had a tightly bunched end to serve as a handle. He had a number of such bundles ready.

"I think they're moving," said the Professor tautly. "In a body. Toward us."

"Maybe," said Carol unsteadily, "they sent word about us somewhere and waited for orders. And now they've got them."

"Ridiculous!" scoffed the Professor.

Lane inconspicuously snapped his cigarette-lighter. He held it ready, its flame very small and yellow, rising undisturbed in the utterly still air of the night.

He saw the stars waver, toward the south. He looked uphill. Stars wavered there, too. To the east. To the north. Overhead there were moving areas in which the stars

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did not seem to stay still, but kept wavering erratically to and fro, exactly as if masses of hot gases were moving about between the people and the sky.

"They're closing in," said Lane curtly. "Overhead and all around."

He saw a little flare. Professor Warren, bent over, struck a paper safety-match on the cover of its packet. Carol waited, standing very still.

Things touched Lane, and the air about him ceased to be. He felt even his clothing stir all over his body, as invisible things pressed against it, throbbing and emitting spiteful, snarling whines. His face and neck felt evanescent, ticklings as if thousands of spider-webs had been thrown out at random to enmesh him. He saw nothing, but the whines were continuous and he could no longer breathe.

The hand that held the cigarette-lighter was still unencumbered. He reached out and ignited a torch of dry straw. Flames leaped up as the straw caught.

The Gizmos were dynamic systems of gas. To be living creatures, that gas had to be hydrocarbon compounds. As such, it was inflammable. It flamed brightly now as the dry straw burned.

The whinings about him became shrieks, unspeakably eerie and horrible. The Gizmos touching his body acquired the feel of a ghastly, throbbing wall. The violence of the wall's movement almost toppled him. He waved the torch savagely, and sparks flew in every direction. There were more hideous stifled screamings. And then he could breathe. But the air about him was foul with mephitic odors.

Carol sat tensely with a flaming torch before her. The Professor had fallen. Her first match had gone out. Her hands still tried desperately to strike a second, but the brittle bit of cardboard had bent in her grasp.

Lane strode to her, waving his torch. It dripped sparks. The Gizmos fled, uttering tiny, unearthly shrieks.

"I think," said Lane savagely, "We're safe enough for the moment. They've had about all they can take."

His torch was already down to the hard twisted handle. He plucked another from his belt and lighted it. It crackled and blazed brightly, and he waved it above his head. The situation had about it an aspect of lunacy—three human beings on the spur of a mountain, menacingly waving torches in the moonlight.

"The trailer!" snapped Lane. "We've got to get set before we try to get far away!"

Carol helped the Professor to her feet. They made their way toward the trailer. Reaching it they waved torches all about its interior. The Professor lighted all four burners of the bottled-gas stove.

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"I feel a fondness for flames, now," the Professor said grimly. "Because these Gizmos don't."

There was a whimpering. The Monster crawled from under the couch which could be unfolded to a double bed. It's daytime cover reached down to the floor, but even so slight a barrier had prevented the Gizmos from entering the space beneath. The dog, though, was in a pitiable state of nerves. He trembled and moaned continuously.

"For the moment," said Lane, "We're on top. But I'm wondering how long we can stay there."

"We have to warn the public," said the Professor. "We have to convince them that the danger will become greater hour by hour. That is our first duty. If we can capture a Gizmo to demonstrate—"

Carol looked at Lane. "She's right, Dick," she said.

Lane shrugged. "We'll see. Meanwhile I'll make some fire-pots. We can't depend on two gallons of gasoline to last forever, but we can pick up sticks and stuff to keep fire-pots going. Where's a can-opener?"

Carol found it and helped him. Lane opened three cans from the food-store, at random. A fire-pot was, of course, merely a tin can with its top off, a draught-hole in one side near the bottom, and a handle made of wire to sling it from. Small boys make them every Fall by some mysterious instinct, and gloriously carry them about for no reason whatever until their parents make them stop for fear of arson. Lane made three. They took minutes, only, to prepare.

"You can whirl it about your head," he observed," with the draught-hole forward, to blow up the fire. I don't think Gizmos can face such things as this."

He demonstrated the whirling of a fire-pot at the end of its two-foot wire handle. He found a wooden packing-box in the laboratory end of the trailer—he was careful to replace the cardboard camera-hole cover—and kicked it into small pieces no bigger than his hand.

Using the fragments he started a fire in one of the tin-can fire-pots. He gave it to Carol. He started a second small blaze in a similar contrivance for the Professor. He slung the gasoline-can over his shoulder and stuffed his pockets with bits of broken wood.

They went out of the trailer, leaving it brightly lighted and abandoned behind them.

They carried tiny fires in tin cans held at the ends of wire handles. From time to time they whirled the firepots about their heads, and once they stopped and gathered about The Monster, who had rolled over on his back and was snapping at nothingness. They grimly passed small containers of glowing coals close to his body—which seemed much

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more like magic than common sense—until he whimpered and got to his feet again. Further on they gathered earnestly about deadfalls and broke off bark and bits of branches to be carried with them for later use in the firepots.

The mountains reared upward as they trudged. Carol absorbedly kept her fire-pot alight, though she was instantly attentive to any word from Lane. He led the way, harassedly endeavoring to compose a reasonable account of what he'd learned, which would immediately convince people who had not been attacked by Gizmos.

And though there was no sound of movement they knew that the Things accompanied them malevolently through this blackness, hoping that the fires in the little tin cans would go out.

After a long time they came to open spaces where innumerable stars shone overhead, and they could look for miles across mountain-flanks lighted by the misshapen moon. Finally they heard, with infinite faintness, the lonely cry of a bird very far away. It had not been murdered, like all other creatures of flesh and blood in the area they had passed through. It was getting lighter now.

"I'm surprised that we've lived this long," said Lane grimly. "I don't think our troubles are over, though."

"I shall get a research-team down here immediately," said the Professor firmly.

She made the statement with that unconscious confidence in superiority which human beings have inherited through some thousands of generations.

Presently sunlight glowed upon the mountains, and they cast elongated shadows upon each other, and little white clouds in the sky were brilliant in sunshine that still had a trace of pink in it. Grass and foliage glittered with dew, and all the air smelled fresh and glorious. Now, birds called to each other from the mountainsides. Somewhere a dog barked. Even insects chirruped in the dawnlight.

Professor Warren surveyed the scene. The three of them had come out of a thicket of mountain-laurel and before them there was a gravel-surfaced road which seemed to come from nowhere and to lead on to the same destination. There was no house in sight, but there was a steep, grass-grown hillside with patches of red clay showing, which could have been a pasture. A catbird perched on a branch less than thirty feet away and uttered its raucous cry.

The Professor looked about her with great satisfaction. "Birds singing," she said appreciatively. "I hear bugs. This territory, anyhow, is not occupied by Gizmos. And now we've got to get to a

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long-distance wire." She dumped the smoking embers of her fire-pot.

Carol started a little at her aunt's action. She looked mutely at Lane.

"Murfree's Court House should be somewhere over yonder," he said, nodding toward his left. "We're probably still five or six miles away, though."

There was a noise in the distance. The Professor stopped, glancing sharply toward the source of the sound. It increased and was plainly the motor of a not over-new automobile travelling on the highway in their direction.

It came into view. It was a battered, dark-green car with a dust-caked hood.

The Professor waved her arms. The car braked and stopped. The man who drove it regarded them with lively interest.

"Can you give us a lift?" asked Lane, telling himself that it would not be wise to start a conversation with a sane person by trying to explain the emergency behind the request.

"Where d'you want to go," asked the man. "Hop in."

"We want," said the Professor firmly, "to get to a telephone. A pay telephone, because we have to make some long distance calls."

She climbed into the car. There were many parcels in the back. She rearranged them to make room for herself in the back seat. Carol looked mutely at Lane, indicating the fire-pot in her hand in which coals still smouldered. He glanced at the dog. The Monster was exhausted and ravaged by past terror, but he did not seem frightened now.

"I guess it's all right," he said slowly. "I've still got the gasoline and my lighter. And this car will travel fairly fast."

She dumped the coals. He emptied his own. It did not occur to either to abandon the objects which had been such effective defenses against Gizmos during the past night. The Monster had almost to be lifted into the car. Lane and Carol climbed in. The driver watched them wisely. He shifted the gear-lever and the motor roared. The car jolted into motion and its clamor grew less.

"Are you," asked the driver, gesturing, "that professor who's studying turkey-buzzards back that a-way?"

"Right," said the Professor.

"And she's your niece," said the driver, "and he's that fella that writes pieces about hunting."

"Right," said the Professor.

"My name's Burke," said the driver. "Glad to meet you. You found out what killed those cows, and partridges and foxes and dogs and such?"

Lane did not answer. The Professor grunted.

"I found out," said Burke. "I'm not sure I believe it, but

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I found out. So I'm leaving these parts. Got my luggage right here with me. I'm goin' some place else."

"What did you find out?" asked Lane.

"Never mind!" said Burke. "Never mind that now. You wouldn't believe me if I told you!"

He pressed on the accelerator. The car picked up speed. The dust rose in a reddish cloud behind the car.

"Nearest telephone's along this way," said Burke.

Lane said in a whisper to Carol, "We should be safe now. It's unthinkable that Gizmos could travel really fast. Even if they trailed us from the forest, they'd have been left behind now."

The car soon swerved into a filling-station which was wholly modern.

Burke braked on its concrete apron. "Telephone here," he said. "Hi, Sam! I brought you some phone-customers."

The filling-station proprietor came out, leisurely. A cat accompanied him. The Professor got out of the car. She nodded briskly. She could see the phone. She went inside, fumbling in the pockets of her breeches for coins with which to make her call. The Monster lay on the floor of the car, panting.

The filling-station operator said humorously, "Seen any more haunts?"

Burke said angrily, "Hell! I didn't say I saw anything! Y'can't see 'em! They'll move danglin' strings, an' they make noises, an' they'll make tracks in flour sprinkled over a buried dead chicken. But y'can't see 'em!"

Lane and Carol exchanged startled glances. Then Lane's face went expressionless. He could see Professor Warren inside the plate glass window of the filling-station. She put coins into the instrument.

"When I see 'em," said the filling-station man," I'll think about believin' in 'em."

Professor Warren, inside the filling-station, greeted someone on the telephone. She began to speak, crisply and with authority, into the instrument.

"They've been killin' things," said Burke sagely. "They're what's killed off the game people've been talkin' about. They killed those cows in the Court House a while back."

The filling-station man said, with a crude attempt at humor, "They ain't killed me yet."

"They'll get to you," said Burke firmly. "They've been leavin' us humans alone—so far. But don't worry—they'll get to you. I'm not stayin' around till they start killin' people. How're you goin' to fight somethin' you can't see?"

Inside the filling-station, Professor Warren's expression turned

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to one of shock. A sound came through the plate glass. It was the Professor's voice, expressing a violently disparaging opinion of the person at the other end of the line. Then she stopped and jiggled the hook furiously. She slammed down the receiver and came out, raging.

"The crazy fool," she stormed. "He pretended to think I was joking. He said it was bad taste to get him out of bed to listen to a joke! He hung up on me! He says he's going to complain to the dean!"

She stamped her feet, ready to weep from pure infuriated frustration. But at that instant The Monster whimpered. Then he yelped, and tried to burrow underneath the car-mat. He scratched desperately to make a place to hide, while he howled ever more shrilly and horribly.

Lane turned pale and his hand went to the two-gallon gasoline-can which so far he had not used at all. Carol gasped, and pointed down the road.

Back along the dust road on which the car had come there was a cloud-like stirring of the air. Over the top of the growing corn there was a great movement of dust. At the first glance—but only at first—it looked as if another car were coming down the highway. But the dust cloud was larger than a car could have raised. Moreover, it had not been stirred up—to float and then settle back again.

It moved as a unit, and it did not merely sweep along the highway. It rolled. It was a monstrous ball of air-borne reddish powder which rolled swiftly and relentlessly onward. It was the height of a six-storey building, and it was horribly, terribly purposeful.

It came swiftly toward the filling-station.

V

LANE JUMPED OUT of the car, unscrewing the top of the gasoline-can as he descended to the road. He began to pour recklessly, making a fifteen-foot circle of wetness on the dry ground.

"Fire-pots!" he snapped. "Carol! Get 'em, quick! And get inside this circle! All of you!" He lighted the gasoline he'd spilled. The flame ran around the ring of oil-soaked ground.

The gigantic dust-ball swept on. It turned in its path, following the roadway. It rolled up to and over the filling-station. There it ceased to roll. Instead, it hovered. Dust poured down from it in a blinding, choking downpour. There was a shrill sound in the air like the keening of a storm-wind. There were eddies and currents and violent gusts, in which the gasoline-flames leaped and gamboled.

There was a dust-storm of a thickness and intensity to over-

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whelm anything. But it was strictly localized. A hundred yards from the filling-station in any direction, the air was perfectly calm. There was no stirring of dust. There was no disturbance of the utter tranquility of early morning. But in the center of the dust-cloud—

"In here!" rasped Lane. "Quick—all of you!"

He grasped Carol's arm, drawing her into the ring of fire. The Professor came stumbling. Lane plunged out through the flames and brought in Burke. The filling-station proprietor was down, fighting madly for his breath, his arms flailing crazily. He was suffocating, half-buried in dust.

Lane broke out again, holding his breath, and tugged at him.

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The strangling man fought as if he were drowning. And things tugged at Lane. His garments quivered. Gizmos as individuals were the weakest and feeblest of creatures. But in some strange, ghastly fashion they had now formed themselves into a greater dynamic system which moved as a single entity. Swirling currents —composed of the whining horrors—twisted and spun madly in a complex fashion which combined their separate strengths into the power of storm-winds close to hurricane force.

The filling-station proprietor fought the tumbling dust on his knees, lashing out with both arms. And Lane himself was strangling . . .

The reek of burning gasoline struck his nostrils. Carol had scooped up the gas-soaked dust in a fire-pot. She bent over him with it, enabling him to regain his feet and breathe freely again.

He staggered back to the ring of flame, dragging the other man. Carol swung her tin-can torch. They got through to the center of the ring. Dust drifted down in palpable masses. Any other source of flame would have been quickly overwhelmed: put out. But the gasoline wetted the dust which fell into it, and flamed constantly higher as it spread.

The Professor, with shaking hands, filled a firepot with burning gas-soaked dust and whirled it about her head, shouting indistinguishable words above the uproar.

"It will burn out soon!" gasped Carol in Lane's ear.

"I know!" he wheezed, grasping her by the shoulder. "Come with me! Swing the fire-pot! I'll pump gas out on the ground and light it."

She caught his hand, and they plunged through the smoky yellow flames. Instantly they were in a monstrous tumult and a storm of blinding, stifling dust. It was partly pure good fortune which made Lane stumble into Burke's car in the midst of the screaming obscurity about him. Its wheels were already hub-deep in dust.

He dragged Carol around the car and fought his way to the gas-pumps. He pulled loose a hose and flipped the rack-arm so that the pump would start. He lurched away to the limit of the hose's length—breathing through doubled folds of his coat while Carol swung a fire-pot—and spurted out a flood of gasoline, letting it pour at full volume on the ground.

Carol cried in his ear, "The fire-pot's burned out!"

Things tugged at him. He began to suffocate again. He snapped his lighter. Incredibly, the spilled pool of car-fuel caught. There was a booming roar, and flames leaped up crazily down-wind. The roar was followed by a shrieking and a wrenching movement of the

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massed Gizmos as yellow fire leaped up thirty feet into the air.

Carol staggered, and he steadied her, and then took the burned-out fire-pot from her hand and dribbled gasoline into it and lighted it at the booming pond of fire. He threw the flaming sand to right and left. There were more thin screamings.

"That's the trick!" he panted.

He flung more burning gasoline-soaked dust. Flames went soaring through the close-packed Gizmos of the dust-cloud formation. The greater dynamic system was wounded, as parts of it were ignited, the first Gizmos to perish passing their own destruction on to others. Then, still unable to speak for lack of breath, Carol pointed.

Lane struggled to drag the gas-hose nearer to the ring of fire he'd first made, creating another leaping pool of flame, and a third . . .

The squealing dust-cloud began to thin. The globular cluster of Gizmos which had been the height of a six-storey building evaporated. It ceased to exist as a unit—a system—a swarm—an army. The dust now drifted downward, and the Gizmos themselves became invisible.

Perhaps they fled, or perhaps they continued to hover nearby. Lane only knew that they no longer whined and whirled about the filling-station, and that the towering mass of dust had settled tranquilly to the ground.

The scene of the attack had changed remarkably. When the car had first arrived, there had been a dusty dirt road leading past a gas-pump platform of concrete. Behind it there had stood, facing the road, a very neat, very modern filling-station, with a workshop and a greasing-rack and plate-glass windows all tidy and bright and business-like.

Now there was a great splotch of fallen dust upon the landscape, like a miniature Sahara. From four different spots, four fountains of smoky yellow flame roared upward. Dense black soot rose in columns from the tops of the flames. The filling-station was smeared with dust. A dune ran into the workshop. There were rust-red hillocks, one of which almost enclosed the car. There was an area a hundred yards across in which no green thing showed, covered with pure dry powder, fine as talc.

Staggering, nearly knee-deep in the impalpable stuff, the Professor and Burke hauled at something so dust-covered that it was unrecognizable until they had dragged it clear. The smoke-blackened form was the filling-station proprietor.

The Professor began to apply artificial respiration—unskillfully but with great earnestness. At her urgent command, Burke helped

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her. There was a tiny stirring somewhere and the filling-station cat emerged from a tumbled mound of dust. It sneezed and spat and moved daintily away to more solid ground.

One of the fires began to burn low. The flame-ring Lane had made first now went out. There was the smell of burned gasoline.

Lane returned to Carol's side. Together, they waded through the yielding dust to where the Professor and Burke labored to revive the filling-station man.

"This affair," said the Professor," is a great deal more serious than I imagined. I am afraid this poor man is dead!"

Burke, working beside her, said profoundly, "You folks must've worked things out even better than I did. I wouldn't've thought of fighting ghosts with fire. But it sure chased 'em!"

"Things like this," the Professor said grimly, "are almost certain to happen all over the country!"

"If you don't need help just yet," said Lane, "I'll try the phone again. I might be able to get a doctor."

He waded through the dust to the station again. Carol went with him. He used the telephone, at first to try to get a doctor for the owner of the station, and then for long-distance. Finally he hung up, his face dark.

"It's not good?" Carol asked.

"It could hardly be worse," he said bitterly. "No doctor. There are only two in Murfree Court House. They're both out. Emergency calls. People dead or believed to have died in their sleep. I tried for other doctors nearby. There were a dozen sudden deaths in the country last night—in four families. All the doctors are busy trying to find out what they died of, because it looks contagious."

His voice hardened. "They're trying to find out how to protect the other members of the families involved, because they must have been exposed. A sudden disease is a better explanation than mine for the things that've happened everywhere last night. It's easier to believe, anyhow!"

They returned to the car. Burke had heaved the limp form of the proprietor over his shoulder and was struggling through the quagmire-like dust toward the station.

"He's dead," said the Professor. He breathed in dust, drowned in it. The poor devil didn't have a chance."

Burke said resignedly, "His number was up, that's all. Those things came, carryin' dust, an' they dropped it. They'd've managed to put out any fire we made, except a gasoline-fire. That's what they had the dust for." He added, "Somebody must've fought 'em with fire before, and they figured out what to do about it."

"We did," said Lane grimly. He spoke to the Professor. "Gizmos

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aren't a local product. They're nationwide. There were sudden deaths everywhere last night—hundreds of them. What's happened here has been happening everywhere, with variations. The official reaction is that some new disease has developed among animals, and that now it's attacking humans.

"It's being referred to as a plague, which so far has hardly appeared in cities. People are advised to get rid of their pets, stay away from any place where there's wild life, and wait for bacteriologists and epidemiologists to track down the germ and develop immunizing shots against it."

The Professor was appalled. "The idiots!" she raged. "The half-wits!" Her voice rose. "They're digging their own graves. We've got to tell them—"

"No," said Lane. "We've got to *show* them."

Burke waded past him with his burden. He put the proprietor inside his filling-station, then returned to the car. He examined it carefully and brushed a six-inch mass of dust from the top of the hood. He brushed at the radiator. He climbed in and started the motor, listening with a critical ear.

He nodded, and put the engine in gear. The car moved slowly, with many slippings, through the dust which flowed almost like a liquid. Its exhaust left a trail on the surface. Monstrous frozen dust-waves were made by its wheels. The dune-like coating on its roof slipped and slid and poured downward.

Once clear of the thicker dust-deposit, Burke stopped the car again. He got out and came back to the filling-station. He came out with a brush and cloths. He began to clean the car. and then wipe the windows to transparency once more. When he had finished, he beat at his own clothing to rid it of dust.

"I'm known to sportsmen as a reasonably truthful writer about hunting," said Lane. "But that's not a quick channel to acceptance for our kind of information. Have you better contacts than that?"

The Professor shook her head. "If they've got the idea that it's a plague," she said bitterly, "it will be ten times harder to make them see sense! There's nobody as hidebound as a researcher! They talk about team-work, but it means that nobody dares suggest anything the rest of the team won't accept! I've a reputation for imagination, and imagination is the one thing that scares a scientific mind!"

Burke approached, still brushing at his clothing. "Me," he said, "I'm leaving. I figure you people kept me from getting what he got —" he gestured toward the filling station—"and you know plenty that I'd like to know. You knew what to do when they came in a

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dust-cloud. I've got to figure things out, and I want all the information I can get. Do you want to come along with me?"

"We certainly don't want to stay here!" Lane said. He turned to the Professor again. "Your best bet, of course, is to get back to the University with your facts."

"Facts?" fumed the Professor. "What good are facts? I've got to show Gizmos—alive, dead, stuffed and made into microscopic slides for histological examination before anybody with a scientific reputation will agree that a thing can be alive without being flesh and blood."

Lane was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I've got some friends. They're a mixed bunch. Some will believe me, but as they're merely business men who happen to be hunters and fishermen, nobody will listen to them any more than they would to me. But there's one man. . . . He's head of a pharmaceutical laboratory in New Jersey. They make antibiotics and such things. We've hunted and fished together. It's not likely he'll accept all we've found out without some proof. But he'll let me show him the proof—if I can get it to him."

The Professor shrugged.

"One more phone-call, then," said Lane," and we'll start." To Burke he said, "We'll ride with you and tell you what we know. When you want to split off, you'll let us out at the nearest airfield or railroad station. Does that suit you?"

"You made a bargain," said Burke. "I'll fill up the car."

Lane went back into the filling-station. Carol followed. He heard a curious scratching sound. Instantly tense, he went to investigate. It came from an overturned oil-drum. He dragged at it and The Monster crawled from beneath it, cringing, moaning, trembling in every muscle. He had fled to the darkest, remotest place his terror-stricken instincts could suggest. He had not been killed. The Gizmos of the dust-cloud had concentrated upon the humans.

Lane dropped a coin in the phone. Outside, Burke filled the tank of the car to overflowing. He hunted in the stock-room and found half a dozen one-gallon emergency tanks. He filled each one carefully, and carried them to the car.

"I've got ideas," he said. "I'm getting ready for 'em!"

Lane heard him in the workshed as the phone connection via Richmond and Washington and Philadelphia went through to New Jersey. The connection was completed.

It was twenty minutes before Lane hung up, his face set in harsh lines.

Burke was sitting at the wheel of the car. When Lane came out he said with perhaps excessive re-

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lief, "I was scared they were comin' back with a new trick. If they had, I'd've had to go off and leave you."

Lane did not answer. The Professor was already in the car. He held the door for Carol. She urged The Monster to climb in. She had practically to lift him.

Burke started the motor. The car moved away. "They'll figure," he said, "that we'll head back to get to a hard surface road. I'm goin' to fool 'em. No runnin' into an ambush for me! Those critters are smart!" He fell silent for a moment. Then he said, "I bet they' Martians! They could've landed a long while ago and been building up their invasion army and studyin' us, and now they're ready to take over. But they don't know us humans!"

The Professor said, "Dick, you heard news on the telephone. What was it?"

Lane was hesitant about telling [illegible]er. He had heard the sort of information which would ordinarily be sent first to laboratories turning out biologicals. It was news of an outbreak of the "plague" duly credited first to lower animals, and now to men.

Lane had heard the official report on an outbreak of sudden death in the village of Serenity, Colorado.

The rural mail-carrier found out what had happened when he came back to town shortly after sunrise. The village of Serenity had been destroyed by its own inhabitants to prevent the Gizmos from enslaving the entire population.

And Lane, riding in an ancient car two thousand miles from Serenity, trembled now with rage because Gizmos had dared to offer such an outrage to the human race.

Carol looked anxiously at him.

He decided to tell Professor Warren exactly what he had heard over the phone. But for Burke's benefit, he put it in words of practically one syllable.

When he had finished Burke said, "But just suppose they *are* Martians. Or that they come from Jupiter or Venus or somewhere. Suppose they landed in a forest. What'd we do if we landed on Mars or Jupiter and found there was forests with animals in 'em."

"Let's not suppose anything of the sort," snapped the Professor. "The facts are preposterous enough!"

Burke shook his head. "You don't get me," he said. "If we landed on Mars or Jupiter, we'd be cagy. We'd kinda hide ourselves and do some scoutin'. We wouldn't go around saying, 'Take us to your leaders.' We'd make ourselves a hide-out and we'd study what we were up against. We'd try out our guns on the animals. We'd find out if they were good to eat.

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"If we found there were Martians or Jupiterians that were civilized, we'd send back for more men. We'd build up a army. Bein' a long way from home, we'd live off the animals in the forest where we landed, to save transportation so's we could bring in more men. When we got pretty strong, we'd put out some outposts to keep an eye on the natives. We'd make a plan of campaign. We'd keep out of sight till we were ready to take over. Ain't it so?"

"No," said the Professor indignantly. "If we landed on another planet and found civilized inhabitants there, we'd try to make friends!"

Burke said ironically, "Yeah! That's what folks did with the Indians, near four hundred years ago. What they did in Africa. And Australia. They had natives in those places. Us civilized folk made friends with them!"

Professor Warren glared at him. "It's not a parallel." she said shortly.

"But it might be—to those critters you call Gizmos. Just suppose they came from somewhere off of Earth, and they've been layin' low, buildin' up their strength and living off wild game as much as they could to save supplies bein' brought in. Suppose they've been putting advanced bases in the bigger forests. Outposts on the edges. Observation-posts in woodlots. If they' got a big army here already, they'd have to send out foragin' parties. Now and then there'd be sentries and little patrols of Gizmos out, hunting food with orders not to bother humans if they could help it, but not to let any get away that suspected there was such things as them."

"They'd have to be smart to get here from another world. And you check what's happened against that idea! Mistuh Lane beat off an attack by a foragin' party. He did it with dry leaves. He went off and the patrol followed him. But some of 'em sent off for orders what to do about a man who found out they couldn't strangle him if he kept dried leaves before his face.

"They got orders to wait a good chance and kill him when he wasn't expecting it. They got a spy sneaked into the trailer. But you-all caught and killed that one. Then they tried to break in an' kill you-all regardless. They'd got reinforcements by that time. After a while they did manage to break in. They got all three of you alive. They made up their minds to study you, findin' out how fast you learned and so on, and keepin' you alive till they found out all they could. And you turned that trick on them, with fire."

Carol shuddered a little. The Monster, lying at her feet, stirred restlessly.

"You got away," pursued

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Burke, with a very odd air of enjoyment. "You waved fires around your heads, and they couldn't face 'em. Then I came along. And what were the Gizmos doin'? They were sendin' back to Headquarters sayin' you-all were even smarter than they'd expected. And they hadn't a big enough force to handle you, anyways. Maybe Mistuh Lane hit on a squad of Gizmos, first. Maybe a battalion was sent to the trailer. But they must've sent a division to make a dust-storm that'd put out the kind of fires you'd made before and kill you and me without any more fooling, because we knew too much!"

He paused. The car went thumping and booming along a long straight stretch of mountain highway. This was a valley among the Appalachians, and there were pastures and occasional cornfields in view, and the sky overhead was very bright and shining.

"The question," Burke went on, "is how many divisions have they got? How good is their communication system? Have they just got a beachhead here in Murfree County, or are they ready for a general offensive?"

He rolled out the technical military terms with an air of profound satisfaction.

"I've read a lot about wars and fightin'. I'm guessing we've got a war coming with the Gizmos. There's going to be a lot of people killed before it's over. Maybe it'll be touch-and-go. We could even lose! I mean to be one of those that know what to do. Somebody's got to lead the guerrilla fightin' against them, where they've occupied the country. I'm aimin' to be qualified to do just that!"

Lane knew, of course, that the man's assumption of an extra-terrestrial origin for the Gizmos was based on pure guess, and an unlikely one at that. His description of a military organization among the Gizmos was purest fantasy. But, however wrong his assumptions, his estimate of the danger seemed singularly correct.

Professor Warren, however, was less charitable. "Where's the proof?" she demanded. "Reason requires a nervous system. What kind of nervous system could a Gizmo have? They've got something, granted. They find prey. They use cunning. But a highly evolved nervous system is a quite different matter."

Carol was looking steadily ahead, far down the sunlit valley. Suddenly she gasped and pointed with an unsteady hand.

There was a dust-cloud moving out from behind a mountainside ahead. It was not a normal dust-cloud. It grew thicker as it went rolling across cultivated fields. It did not hang in the air where it increased. It moved as a body,

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an entity, with every appearance of volition and purpose.

Burke braked, his eyes wide and frightened. He brought the car to a stop.

A second dust-cloud began to form off to the left. It began to roll down the mountainside. It was larger than the one that had overwhelmed the filling-station.

Burke frantically put the car in reverse, to back around and flee in the opposite direction.

"That's no good," said Lane warningly. "Ahead's the best bet. Look back there!"

Two more of the impossibly dense dust-clouds were already visible behind the car. One came rolling swiftly along the way the car had come. Another was gathering substance from a dirt road as it swept across the valley-bottom.

The four dust-clouds moved to converge upon the stopped car.

VI

THE MONSTER uttered a howling sound which was at once so despairing and so frantic that Lane felt an urgent impulse to kick it. But instead he said urgently to Burke, "Give me the wheel. I know how to handle this."

Burke yielded with alacrity. He fairly popped out the door on the driver's side, encircled the car and leapt in again on the opposite side. His teeth chattered as he cranked the front window tightly shut.

Lane put the car in gear, and moved toward the giant dust-spheres. One was already astride the highway a mile ahead, and the other was rolling horribly downhill to join its faster moving companion.

"What' you going to do?" asked Burke shakily.

"Bet" said Lane, sending the car ahead at a speed far below its maximum, "I'm going to bet that no Gizmo has ever driven a car in traffic."

He was moving a great deal more slowly than the pair of globular whirlwinds behind. One of them was already opaque with its burden of dust, while the other was rapidly gathering substance as it billowed and whirled across the valley along a twisting dirt road. They seemed to be overtaking the car steadily.

"They catching up!" protested Burke shrilly.

"They think so," said Lane.

The sphere ahead and to the left on the mountainside seemed to pause in its rolling, while dust swirled up to thicken it. The one ahead still advanced, blocking the way.

"Migawd!" insisted Burke stridently, "They' all four goin' to hit us at the same time!"

Lane grunted. He held down the car to twenty-five miles, while the

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four globes accommodated themselves to its pace, maintaining an inexorable rate of progress. Each rolling dust-cloud was a full hundred feet in diameter. There were veinings of greater or lesser dust-content where madly moving streams of Gizmos, forming the spheres, became alternately dense and then thinner in their spiralling.

The spheres themselves were dynamic systems, as indeed, a charging herd of more normal beasts can be. They were organizations capable of a greater deadliness than the sum total of their parts. They were, apparently, capable of an almost incredible coordination when acting as groups, a coordination quite similar to the cooperation of individual wolves in a howling pack.

"I begin," exclaimed Professor Warren excitedly, "to see the structure of these things! I wish we had a movie camera!"

"If you're going to let 'em bury us all in dust," protested Burke vehemently, "you let me outa here! You let me—"

Carol reached past his shoulder and locked the car-door. "Dick knows what he's doing," she said evenly. "Be quiet or he *will* let you out!"

Burke's mouth dropped open. Then he shuddered in understanding. A man on foot might not be pursued by a dust-cloud composed of thousands of Gizmos. But there were filmy tendrils of lesser denseness clustered about the on-rushing globes. There would be smaller swarms of Gizmos hastening to incorporate themselves in the larger systems. Any Gizmo in those lesser aggregates could separate itself to overtake and suffocate a fleeing man on foot.

Burke subsided.

"If that thing ahead should stop stock-still and drop its load of dust, it would block the highway with a drift we couldn't possibly get through," said Lane. "That's why I'm driving slowly—to keep it coming toward us."

He sounded calm enough, but his knuckles were white on the steering-wheel. He turned his head to estimate the looming rust-red monstrosity moving on the mountainflank above. He glanced in the back-view mirror to gauge the speed of the one in pursuit. The fourth sphere, rolling across the lateral dirt road, abandoned the road at a curve and came sweeping across partly green, partly red-clay pasture land.

"I hope," Lane said, "that this car has a good pick-up, Burke. Our lives depend on it."

"It's okay," said Burke, in a strained voice.

The situation was at least as nightmarish as any that had gone before. Ahead there was a rolling, writhing rust-red globe the height of half a dozen houses

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piled one atop the other. It was not a solid thing, but a cloud, and one could see into it.

There were veins and cords of circulation which looked like nerves and sinews and a circulatory system, branching and re-branching and re-combining again. It looked chillingly like a naked brain with blood-vessels on its surface.

It loomed directly ahead now, so close that Lane could not see its top through the windshield. To his left an even greater and more revolting monstrosity rolled down the mountainside. To the right a third giant ghastliness closed in. In another moment their bulging middles would close over the car to roof it in, and when that happened solid masses of dust would come plummeting down, to bury the car in powder.

Lane stepped on the accelerator. As the car plunged forward he pressed more deeply, and as it still gathered way he pushed the gas-pedal down to the floor-board. The car leaped to forty-five, to fifty, to sixty miles an hour. It passed the point toward which the four spheres were converging. At its original speed it would have been overwhelmed at that point by all the rolling monstrosities together. But now it swept past the spot, and plunged into the dust-streaming base of the single globe which blocked the highway.

Inside the sphere, at its bottom, there was howling wind and the shrieking whine of Gizmos in uncountable numbers. The car shuddered throughout its entire length. Outside the windows earth piled up as if it had instantly been buried deep underground. The throbbing of its engine was instantly muffled. Its wheels rolled over softness. Its windshield wipers continued to flicker back and forth, but their clicking was inaudible above the shrieking whine of the Gizmos and the unspeakably frantic howling of the dog who heard Gizmos on every hand and began to twist and turn and bite at random in a frenzy of terror.

The car reeled. There was a hissing of dustgrains against glass, and the brownish obscurity deepened to pitch-black darkness for an instant. And then—the car came out into the open air again. Lane sent it hurtling down the highway past the mountain-flanks.

The two men and the two women in the car did not see the simultaneous collision of the four dust-laden monstrosities because the back window remained almost opaque. The onrushing globes crashed together, and in crashing fused, and a writhing chaos rose and wavered and spread out over the road in continuing contortions.

It was the height of a ten-storey building at least, and at one point it was twice as tall, and as it subsided it covered an area a

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quarter of a mile square. The highway was blocked by a mass of swirling dust whose dunes rose to thirty feet in height.

On the road beyond, the car's windshield-wipers became audible again. They made a streaky transparency on the dust-smudged pane by which Lane could steer. In the wake of the monster he'd bored through there was dust all over the highway. There were a few small patches where the bonded gravel showed, but much more was hidden by a dust-film which rippled and sometimes rose into a minor wave.

Everywhere the road was slippery with the fine stuff, and there were times when the car tended to skid. But Lane drove like a madman. He could not look behind. He swung around a curve in the road, and the back-trail of the monster was lost to view, and he knew that the car hurtled onward with no longer a betraying plume of dust behind it. Even the dog's howling ended. He lay limply, as if exhausted, on the floor of the car.

Lane said over his shoulder, "Burke, crank down the window and tell me what you can see behind."

He drove across a bridge, spanning a shallow stream some forty feet in width. In these parts it would be called a river. The road slanted upward along the side of a mountain, leaving the valley in a spiraling curve.

Burke, his teeth chattering audibly, lowered the window. "All I can see is a big cloud of smoke back yonder," he said in a trembling voice. "It ain't stirring much. Looks like it's settling."

"That may mean that the Gizmos are confused," said Lane. "Or it may simply mean they're coming after us without bothering to bring dust with them. They can always pick sand and gravel up when they need it."

The Professor said, grimly, "The dog doesn't agree. He's quiet. After all, Dick, there must be a limit to the speed the creatures can make! There's a limit to the speed of all physical organisms."

Lane kept the accelerator down to the floor. The car continued on its upward course. It was nearing the end of a two-mile climb when Carol said very quietly, "Are you wondering about their communication-system?"

"I am," he admitted. "We've no proof they have one in a mechanical sense. But we know they can assemble enormous numbers overnight. If they can send messages for help—and we've witnessed three examples of it—why can't they send messages of warning? A warning that we must be killed? We, as individuals, right away?"

"It is not likely," said the

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Professor quickly. "In fact, it is most improbable!"

Burke turned from the window. "They' out of sight now," he said with infinite relief. "Maybe we lost 'em, Mistuh Lane. D'you think they can send word on ahead for other ones to watch out for us?"

"Most unlikely!" said the Professor firmly. "Other lower animals can summon aid. Even a baby chick can voice its fear, and its mother will rush to its defense. Ants can summon assistance when they find booty too large for them to handle alone. Other creatures post sentinels and combine for their mutual defense. But no creature lower than man can transmit the idea of an individual identity."

Burke was suddenly garrulous with relief because there were no longer any dust clouds in view. "But are Gizmos lower than us humans?" he asked. "If they came here from Mars or somewhere, they' got to be smart! They could be smarter than us people! They—"

"Mr. Burke," said the Professor tartly, "there is a limit to what even I will believe without positive evidence!"

The road levelled. It ran through a cut between hillsides which rose still higher, though the floor of the valley behind it was now remote indeed. A few hundred yards further on it disappeared in a downward curve.

When they reached the highest point in the steep ascent the view was breathtaking. They had crossed the last of one range of mountains, and they could see across the valley for scores of miles. Everything was green and beautiful. They could see farmhouses and highways and woodland and villages. To the north a small town—it would be Murfree Court House—sprawled out over a square mile or more. The spires of churches rose above its tree-lined streets. There were rolling pastures, and slowly moving herds of grazing cattle.

Lane started the car down the steep incline. He said with great deliberation, "Either the Gizmos are almost manlike in their reasoning powers, and after us individually for a very good reason, or they're a highly intelligent kind of beast. As beasts of the forests, they may have multiplied until they can't stay in the wilderness and have reached the point where they have to move out to get food. In that case, we've got to get mixed up in traffic so they can't identify us. But if they're really familiar with every aspect of our civilization they may try to wipe out all traffic to get us."

"I think," said Carol, regarding him steadily, "that you've got to risk it, Dick. If they kill us when we're alone our death will benefit nobody. But if we force the Giz-

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mos to kill us so openly that their existence becomes a matter of observation and proof—that will be a warning to people who so far don't suspect a thing. Even if we have to risk other people's lives with our own, we've got to make sure the danger from the Gizmos is made known to everyone."

Burke said uneasily, "But we can beat 'em. They can kill other folks, but not us!"

"We hope," said Lane. He added abruptly, "I'm going to go down into traffic."

Ten minutes later he was driving along a road heavy with traffic, despite the earliness of the hour. He knew that he would be compelled eventually, to pass through Murfree Court House, if he went through with his intention of going on to the north. He knew, too, that to mingle with traffic in a small town would be the surest way of confusing trailing creatures hardly qualified to recognize an individual car or a crowded village street. But if the Gizmos were prepared to make a mass attack on many people, it was also the surest way to provoke a massacre.

Lane picked a side road which would be, perhaps, the most dangerous to his party if the Gizmos showed signs of activity before he reached the town, but would not involve other cars in an attack. If they did attack openly as he approached the town, he'd have to take the chance of involving others.

Despite all risks, he was heading north. He had to reach some source of authority—governmental or scientific—which could make use of the information he possessed. Meanwhile he could make no specific plans until he knew more about the state of things in general—whether more atrocities had been committed, or discoveries made about Gizmos as important as his own.

He turned on the car's radio. It gave forth hill-billy music exclusively on nearby station-settings. More remote, regional stations offered a fare of early soap-opera. He turned the instrument off and drove downhill toward the valley before him.

He knew how widely distributed the killings of wild animals had been. If there were relatively as many Gizmos in all the localities where game had been found dead, the Gizmos must outnumber the human population of the country many times over. He'd been uneasy over individual slaughterings of game animals. Now that he knew the Gizmos were capable of mass action the outlook seemed very deadly indeed.

If there had been Gizmos from time beyond remembering, as the ancient tales of ghosts and devils seemed to prove, then something

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had multiplied their numbers, and made them a menace to the whole of humanity. If Burke was right and they had landed on Earth from some other world, then they must be more intelligent than mankind, and humanity would be destroyed.

But Lane doggedly refused to credit their extra-terrestrial origin. It was impossible on the face of it. It would require spaceships and engineering genius, and it was unthinkable that Gizmos could create or control machinery, or that swarms of interplanetary space craft could have avoided detection by the radars of the world.

Gizmos themselves were detectable by radar, but only as phantoms on the radar-screens. They were not multiple, they moved at low speed and they had never been reported from great heights. More convincingly still, creatures capable of building spaceships would have complex and formidable weapons.

Lane's apprehensions increased when he saw a dead cat in a gutter of Murfree Court House's principal street. He drove steadily on into the business part of the town.

The Professor said suddenly, as if ashamed, "Dick, I want to buy something. Will you stop?"

Silently, he parked the car. The heavy coating of dust made it conspicuous, but Lane hoped that it would be looked upon merely as a byproduct of fast driving over dusty roads, even though it was still thickly piled in masses on the trunk-deck in the rear.

Burke looked less apprehensive now. When the Professor climbed out and vanished into a grocery store, he spoke as if rolling the words over his tongue:

"I got it worked out, Mistuh Lane! These Gizmos've got communications, and reserves, and those dust-balls are their mobile armor. They got a chain of command, and division commanders, and they got to have a General Staff and an over-all plan of campaign. The way they operate is stric'ly military! You know what they'll do next. Mistuh Lane?"

Lane turned and looked at him. "I've been trying to guess," he said.

"When a army's going to smash a enemy," said Burke, his eyes very bright, "first thing they do is smash the defenses that are set up and ready to fight. But us humans, we haven't got any. Only us four suspect anything at all. So the invading army can go right on and grab all the territory it likes. And then what does it do?"

"Tell me," suggested Lane.

"It smashes what it can't grab!" Burke told him with fine appreciation. "It attacks what'd be needed to organize a coun-

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ter-attack. Factories, rail-heads, warehouses, communications. It grabs what it can and smashes what the invaded country would need to start to fight back with. That's strategy! The attackin' army makes the defendin' army helpless to fight back. Y'see?"

Lane shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not—"

"These Martians—these Gizmos," said Burke. "They are goin' to grab all the ground they can. With people scattered like they are in the country, nobody can fight 'em. They won't even know what's happening. So the Gizmos take over all the ground outside the cities. But it's in the cities that the scientists live who'd have to find out that there are Gizmos and what they are like. It's in the cities that there's chemicals and explosives and things to make flame-throwers. I'd give a lot for a flame-thrower for us to fight 'em with! It'd be in the cities that counter-attacks would be figured out and started."

"Well?" asked Lane.

"The Gizmos got to hit the cities now," said Burke, bright-eyed and thrilled. "They got to smash our industrial potential." He savored the phrase with pleasure. "Yes, suh! Smash our industrial potential. Turn all the people to refugees. Fill the roads with folks running away from what they think is plague. Keep the Gov'-ment busy trying to organize the evacuation of the cities and trying to feed everybody and lick the plague at the same time—not guessing that they're up against is invasion and a war! They could smash civilization thataway! The cities would be empty, and the highways would be full, and the factories would stop and people would die in their refugee-camps and they'd break out and go somewheres else, and they'd die along the roads, and they'd try to stay by themselves.

"They'd go back to bein' savages! And when it was all over and the Martians—the Gizmos, ruled the earth they'd go whinin' happy through the forest, hunting people. Maybe they'd have kind of hunting preserves for people to live in and be hunted when the Martians felt like it. . . . Maybe they'd keep the empty cities for that, picking out and strangling the people that tried to hide in all the empty buildings that everybody else had left."

Carol said, "That couldn't happen. It's impossible!"

"It could happen," insisted Burke. "It could, all right. There'll be a little town where folks are smart enough to make flame-throwers and explosives, and they'll study the Gizmos scientific, and they'll learn how to kill 'em. And so they'll stand off the Gizmos. And there'll come a time when they will have learned plenty and can take the offensive.

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They'll go sweeping over the world, fighting the Martians on the land and on the sea."

Professor Warren came bustling back to the car. She carried several filled-up brown paper bags. She said crisply, "Dick, there's a hardware store right across the way. I thought of something that would be of use to us that can be purchased in a hardware store? I imagine you know what it is."

Lane started. He got out of the car. "I'll be right back," he said. "You have matches handy?"

"I bought cartons of them," said the Professor. "With some things to make sandwiches with, along with some lighter-fluid for you. I was thinking of a possible gasoline torch. Have you money?"

He nodded and went across the street, pausing at least twice to let a car pass him so that he could advance behind it. It was singular that he should be so aware of the waverings of objects seen through the film of hot air next to the hot metal of a car-hood.

He saw the same rippling interplay of light and movement on a brick wall as he stared along the wall's edge. He was acutely conscious of the minor phenomena of thermal refraction which previously he'd ignored. But he noted it now because the only visual sign of a Gizmo's presence would be a wavering, a faint blurring of the objects visible through it.

He went into the hardware store. It was cool, and air-conditioned. Normally he would not have noticed even that.

He bought two gasoline blowtorches such as plumbers use. The clerk was mildly surprised that he bought two. On the way to the front of the store he saw a portable brazing-torch. It was a tank of compressed gas with a spark-maker near the brazing-tip. One had only to turn on the gas and strike a spark, and a blue-white flame leaped out. There was even a trigger by which the flame could be increased or diminished.

Lane bought two of these, also. Then he invested in pocket lighters and more fuel for them. His cash ran low. He brought out his travellers' checks. He paid for everything and got back his original currency and a little more.

"Isn't there something else?" asked the clerk curiously.

"I'd like," said Lane drily," to buy some Very pistols. But I'm afraid you haven't them on hand."

He went out. Somehow he had a feeling of extreme urgency. He hurried back across the street. It had the bustling, leisurely atmosphere of almost any small town's business district. The Professor put a small object quickly out of sight as he approached the car. She looked embarrassed. Lane automatically chose Carol as the person most likely to be interested in the mechanism of the brazing-torches. Burke gazed, but ap-

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peared absorbed in other thoughts.

"I see," said Carol. "It works —like this."

She lighted and handled the compressed gas torch with competence.

Lane nodded in admiration. "I forgot," he said suddenly. "We need a garbage can."

He went back across the street. The hardware store did have a receptacle with a large top. It was a kitchen-sized garbage container, and his unreasonable feeling of urgency made him speak sharply to the clerk who insisted on wrapping it for him. Back at the car the Professor was gone again to another store.

Carol said, "She went to buy some pillow-cases. When you mentioned a garbage-can she realized that a pillow-case was the thing to use with it. She may get a sheet or two, besides."

Lane got into the drivers seat. All about him the people of Murfree Court House went about their business with the comfortable lack of haste which makes small-town life either deeply satisfying or insupportable to men and women of active temperament. The business district was contained in the two sides of four blocks, which was the only part of the town without trees to provide shade. Here the sunshine was already baking hot.

Sitting in the car, Lane felt what amounted to truculent uneasiness. There had been no sign of Gizmos since the car came over the pass from the next valley to the east. But still—

Lane waited with growing impatience for the Professor's return. He wanted to get out of town now as quickly as possible. With the new equipment they could defend themselves more adequately than before, and he didn't want to be attacked—if they were to be attacked—in the middle of a town whose people would not know what was happening until utter disaster struck.

A dog trotted across the street, wisely watching the traffic and moving with that matter-of-fact acceptance and adjustment to the ways of men which is so casual among dogs.

Carol watched the animal, too, as it paused in the middle of the street to let a car go by, and trotted the rest of the way at the same leisurely pace. A man on the sidewalk stopped to speak to it. It was one of those trivial incidents which could not possibly happen in a city where dogs have only masters and not human acquaintances to greet them. The dog politely wagged his tail, and trotted on.

"Aunt Ann," said Carol, "likes to believe that dogs are quite unlike other domesticated animals. They were bred. She says that dogs are entirely men-made. They didn't exist as wild creatures. And

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she says that dogs are the most creditable of human achievements."

Lane felt that obscure but pleasing sensation which comes from sharing a completely original and emotionally satisfying viewpoint. He was still uneasy, but it was necessary to wait.

Lane's impatience and uneasiness were increasing when, quite suddenly, an elderly man on the sidewalk opened his mouth to gasp. He staggered, beating the air before him. His eyes went panicky, and he fell to his knees, choking and gasping for breath. He jerked his head from side to side, his mouth open. He fought crazily against nothingness.

The Monster howled.

"Shut the windows," snapped Lane.

He was out of the car, rushing for the fallen man. Other people were hurrying to help. Somebody bent over the victim as he collapsed to the street. Lane elbowed his way between three men and two women and snapped his lighter before the face of the semi-conscious, panic-crazed oldster.

The flame leapt and glowed steadily for an instant. There was a horrible malodor. A thin shrill shriek ended before it was well begun. The fallen man sat up, his face no longer congested and convulsed by the terrible cutting off of his breath.

The Monster howled once more.

"Look here!" said Lane sharply. "I've seen this before. If it ever happens to you again, or to anybody else, make a flame. Wave it close! You'll be able to breathe! Tell everyone you know! Spread the warning!"

A dozen people had gathered about the still badly shaken figure. Others were hastening to see what was the matter. Lane looked about him, hoping for understanding but there was blank incomprehension on every face. It was a group of small-town people, concerned over the plight of an elderly man who had apparently suffered a stroke or a sudden heart attack. To them, what Lane had done had no rational connection with the emergency, and they must have thought him quite mad.

The bystanders started gasping and the others were too startled to think at all. The second stricken man fought against suffocation with stark terror in his eyes. He tore at his throat, went reeling backwards.

Lane leapt toward him, and waved the lighter-flame before his face. Almost simultaneously another villager collapsed behind him and there were more cries. The dog yelped in the car, wildly, frenziedly, and tried to find a place to hide.

Lane heard whining sounds, and just as he turned a gaunt,

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hollow-eyed woman in her early forties collapsed two yards away. The tiny crowd was still bewildered, still unable to realize that danger existed for them as well as for the three struggling figures on the ground.

Lane flung himself to his knees beside the woman, and waved his lighter-flame, but he knew that he would soon be struggling against impossible odds, for the whinings were loud now all about him.

He knew that he could not possibly fight a swarm of Gizmos with a pocket-lighter. But he had to try—

He was still kneeling before the woman when the Professor leapt down from the car and came to his aid, flourishing—of all imaginable things—a pillow case. With grim determination she thrust the open end of the pillow-slip down upon the contorted face of the fallen man next to him. The pillow-case billowed.

The Gizmo was caught in it. It throbbed and fluttered horribly inside the cloth. The Professor closed the open end of the bag, squeezing it together tightly with both hands. She was breathing harshly when she held the trapped Gizmo triumphantly aloft. It made a frantic buzzing whine . . .

Lane freed his own lips and nostrils by burning another of the small, invisible abominations with his lighter.

His eyebrows were singed by the flare-up, but at least he could breathe again. His senses reeled, and he experienced a hatred so intense that he would have liked to go on forever, destroying Gizmos one by one, and living on hatred only.

But of course he could not.

VII

BLUE-WHITE FLAME flashed before Lane's face, and then Carol was at his side, tugging frantically at his arm.

"Back to the car! Aunt Ann has a prisoner! Perhaps they'll follow us—if we drive quickly out of town."

She was holding the brazing-torch, sweeping the flame back and forth, extending it to the limit. A brazing-torch was supposed to burn two hours on a tank of compressed gas. But there was no need for prolonged burning now, for it protected them completely.

Lane fought his way back to the car. There were violent wind-gusts against which he had to lean. As he retreated he saw that the Gizmos were forming themselves into the globular swarm-organization which they'd used before to carry dust as a weapon. Against them, Lane played the long flame like a sweeping scythe. Once, apparently, the fire-blade penetrated to one of the vein-like currents which had been visible

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in the dust-clouds. Fire leaped along that steady flow.

But this swarm was no dust-cloud. It was not quite invisible because the appearance of minor waverings produced by a single Gizmo was multiplied by their number. The tops of nearby houses became blurred, went out of focus.

Into that whining organization of spinning Gizmos Dick Lane probed fiercely. Once he hit what in a rolling dust-cloud would have looked like a surface vein, and the dying Gizmos carried the pale thin flame for forty feet, into the air. But suddenly he struck an artery, and the thinnest and palest of conflagrations leaped along the whining wind and flared up. The Gizmo-swarm broke up, shrieking.

A horse tied to a farm-wagon reared, and kicked and fell to the ground. A grocery clerk in an apron ran crazily, whipping the air before his face. Another youth, on his knees, battled nothingness and slowly toppled to the sidewalk.

The odor of burned Gizmos was not pleasant. The Professor was still tightly grasping the inflated, frantically throbbing pillow-case. Carol beat upon the door of the car. Burke, in the driver's seat, was trying with shaking hands to fill the gas-cup of a gasoline blow-torch. He heard nothing. He had closed and locked the doors in unreasoning terror.

Lane struck the door-glass with the tank of the brazing-torch. It was not a gentle tap. The glass cracked and held together only because of its shatter-proof construction.

"Open up!" raged Lane. "Or I'll burn a way in!"

Burke jerked his head up, and reached for the tiny knob which worked the door locks. His fingers were all thumbs. Finally he managed to release the lock mechanism and throw the door wide.

"Down with the window, Carol," ordered the Professor. "Dick, you're taking the wheel again. This idiot has dangerously delayed us."

Lane crowded Burke out of the way. He started the motor. The Professor seated herself solidly beside him. She held the shrilling, fluttering pillow-slip outside.

"Use the flame, Carol," she urged, her voice harsh with strain. "The monsters are trying to tug my fingers lose."

Her voice was cut off. Carol quickly swung the flame that Lane had surrendered to her parrallel to her aunt's face, holding it steadily at an oblique angle. The Professor breathed freely again. The car moved. It pulled out into the street, the dog howling uninterruptedly.

"Now," said the Professor over the dog's outcry," we make this

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creature desperate. Keep them from suffocating me, Carol."

She caught the neck of the pillow-slip bag with her other hand. She twisted it, confining the imprisoned Gizmo more tightly still. It uttered a frantic buzzing, whining sound which rose hideously in pitch. Even the dog's howling failed to drown it out.

"There!" said the Professor with superb confidence. "Now we can make time! I think they'll follow us!"

Lane swerved to avoid a stalled car. The traffic in the town had been considerable, but the tumult had lasted barely five minutes. A dozen cars had stopped to see what was the matter. Seemingly their human occupants had lost the primeval instinct to flee any spot where other humans might be in trouble.

But Lane was leading that trouble away—he hoped. Once, where double-parking blocked the road, he drove up on the sidewalk and went around the jammed place. The car swerved out into the street again and continued on.

"Look behind," Lane ordered, "and see if people are still being attacked!"

"One man's getting up," Carol said. "People are scattering in all directions, but they do not seem to be fleeing. There's another man being helped up."

"How badly are things blurred?" demanded Lane. "If the whole swarm's following us—"

There was a pause. He drove at twenty miles an hour. Trees appeared ahead. The business district swept past.

"They're following," said Carol, suddenly. "They aren't thick at the ground-level. I can see clearly there. Most of them are higher. House-tops are fuzzy to look at. Probably most of them are higher still."

Trees closed over their heads. The car rolled on.

The Professor said with an air of calm inquiry, "Do you think I'd better squeeze this thing tighter, Dick? They seem to be with us. I can feel them touching my hands and wrists. Carol's keeping a flame playing out the window, but they keep after the Gizmo in the pillow-case."

"Maybe I can speed up a trifle," said Lane. He did so. It did not occur to him to be astonished at the Professor's composure.

"Twenty-five miles an hour," he said a moment later. "We'll time their maximum flight-speed. When they stop fumbling at your hands, we'll have hit their limit."

The car went out of the green-shaded streets of Murfree Court House. The cloudless sky and brilliant sunshine on the open fields helped to restore their shaken confidence, and lessened the grimness of their mood. Roll-

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ing valley-bottom and towering mountains made an amazing difference in the feel of the world. There were, now, small buffetings of breeze in the opened front windows of the car. It continued to gather speed.

"They're barely able to keep up, now," said the Professor. "How fast?"

"Thirty-two—no, thirty-three miles an hour. I'm slowing."

The dusty, antique car rattled less loudly and roared at a lessened tempo.

The Professor grunted, "They're back in force now. I don't like the feel of them—the way they're fumbling at my hands. They are nasty creatures, Dick! Carol, is the main swarm still following?"

A pause, while Carol made sure. There was a blurring of the sharpness now, and they could see the road and the dwindling countyseat.

"They're still following," Carol said.

"Find out from Burke," Lane told her, "where we can safely do what has to be done. We don't want to be near any town."

Burke had not spoken once since the others had forced him to open the car-door. Now he said, dry-throated, "I'm sorry, Mistuh Lane, that I couldn't help much back yonder. But I didn't rightly understand what you-all were plannin' to do."

"That's all right," said Lane, gripping his arm. "The Gizmos attacked Murfree Court House. Professor Warren caught one, and we're making the others follow us. While they follow, they can't kill people anywhere in the vicinity. Now we want to know where it's safe to make them stop trailing the car. Somewhere as far as we can get from a village and, if possible, even a dwelling."

"Y-yes, suh," said Burke. But he still sat frozen. The dog howled again.

"Slap him," said Lane irritably. "Make him shut up. And try to be of some help to us, if you can."

"I'll—try to think, suh," said Burke.

Lane drove on. Burke evidently could not think. Clouds banked up ahead. There were flickerings of lightning.

"Looks like a wandering thunderstorm," said Lane. "I might manage to drive through it. What do Gizmos do in thunderstorms?"

The Professor chortled. "It should be a beautiful thing. A gas metabolism means ionized gases. But when you want to de-ionize a gas you bubble it through water! Rain ought to cut them down to size!"

Lane saw the gray front of falling water appear through a rift in the westward rampart of the mountains. It advanced over the more distant crests—a long, drapery-like curtain of rain that

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moved slowly into the valley. The highway forked, and Lane chose the turning which would take the car nearer to the rain.

"Maybe if the rain enables us to lose the others, we can keep this one," said the Professor hopefully.

"For a pet, no doubt," said Lane. "Is it in extra good voice just now, or are the ones behind us getting nearer?"

"Some," Carol told him, "are going on ahead."

"That could be dangerous," said Lane. "I don't know how smart they are, but if they're smart enough they might blind me with dust and get me ditched."

He increased the car's speed a trifle and headed for the center of the storm-area.

Presently there was a rush of winds, bearing dust in curling masses before it. Then a gray misty curtain marched across the land. The car rumbled and rattled between ranks of pine-trees which hid everything but the dark clouds overhead and the road itself.

With a sudden rush the rain arrived. It pattered loudly on the car's roof, and washed reddish streaks of wetted dust down the back window, and the windshield-wipers swept it from one side to the other. The Professor cranked up the window beside her, cramping the open end of the pillow-case tightly in place. The inflated bag of cloth flapped and wabbled outside and was quickly drenched.

The woodland on either side became almost black. Thunder roared and lightning flashed, and the tires sang and the windshield wipers clicked and the air inside the car became dank and somehow fragrant with odors brought in by the wet.

"We ought to bring our prisoner in," said the Professor, uneasily. "We can probably get it in the little garbage-can you've provided. I've decided, Dick, that if I can take this loathsome thing to Washington and show it to some government biologists, there'll be no difficulty in convincing them that immediate, drastic action is necessary.

"Perhaps," said Lane. "But I'm not worried too much about the Gizmos' health. Let it stay outside."

Lane drove on. The road curved to the right and went steeply down, returning toward the broader bottom of the valley. There was rain in solid masses, falling on pasturelands and sandy wastes. The falling water hid everything beyond a hundred yards.

They had ridden for a good two miles beyond the last patch of pine-trees when the downpour stopped. Ahead, the storm marched toward the north and east. They followed it. The pillow-slip, still bouncing and flapping outside the car-window did not look as resilient as before.

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"I wish you'd stop," said the Professor suddenly. "We don't know what the rain might have done to my specimen. It doesn't seem to be moving inside the bag."

Lane braked and stopped the car. "Watch the landscape behind," he said briefly to Carol. "I'll keep a close look-out ahead."

He heard the Professor cranking down her window. A moment later she was examining the bag. The pillow-slip was wetted by rain from one end to the other. The wetted cloth still contained bubbles, but none of them was big enough to be a Gizmo.

"It's dead!" She said. "I might have known!"

In tight-lipped silence she opened the neck of the wetted sack. An intolerable odor of carrion came out. She hastily threw the pillowcase out of the window.

Lane put the car into gear and went on. He thought he heard the Professor sob and mutter bitterly under her breath, but he did not turn.

For almost an hour there was no tangible evidence that Gizmos existed anywhere save in the area they had left. But Lane knew better. He knew better even though there was no overt incident, nor any unmistakable sign of invisible creatures hovering above the dark woodlands and sun-drenched meadows.

Once, to be sure, they came to a place where they saw four dead cattle on a hillside. But that was nothing to indicate that Gizmos had been there. Lane stopped the car and cut off the motor. He listened. The universe was without sound. No insects. No snatches of bird song. He started the motor once more.

"Not proven," he said wryly, "But I've a feeling we're under observation still. Incidentally, it ought to take a lot of Gizmos to kill all the insects that chirp and twitter."

Professor Warren stared at him as if appalled at the idea. And it was a startling idea, once one considered it. Any insect-eating bird captures bugs by hundreds or thousands every day, and there is no acre of open ground without its numerous feathered foragers. Woodlands shelter many more. Swifts and swallows carry on their hunting until late in the twilight, and bats carry on through the dark. Few people realize how many bats there are.

To realize the number of insects devoured on one acre in one day is to be amazed, and yet the number of insects is not diminished. To depopulate a field of its insect inhabitants is incredible destruction. Count in ants and tiny beetles, and those mites of winged things that are smaller than gnats, and human incredulity grows. To destroy also the birds, the field mice, the rabbits, the moles . . .

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"I did not realize, Dick," said the Professor thoughtfully, "how many Gizmos would be needed to destroy even the gnats, where we had our trailer! Those dust-spheres must have contained uncounted numbers of them. And any one of them can kill a human being! Dick, it's a frightful thought."

"I've been suspecting it for some time," said Lane.

Suddenly Carol cried out in alarm. A living partridge flapped and flailed upon the ground. As they watched, it lay still. And Lane, concernedly searching, saw that the grass-blades beyond it seemed to quiver slightly, as if there were a bubble of heated gases above the stricken bird. It lay quite motionless. It was surely dead.

Later he swerved into a small-town filling station to fill up the car's gas-tank, and while the pump clattered he went across the street and bought papers.

He read that officials everywhere were being hounded into action. There was great danger in many areas from carnivores, like wild cats and bears, abandoning their natural haunts. Another story revealed how country people, listening in on a party-line telephone, had died of their curiosity. They'd gone to see in person the atrocities they'd learned about, and were discovered later with purple faces, their tongues protruding.

"I'm going to telephone again!" said Professor Warren desperately when she'd read the account and seen the pictures. "The men who run the bulldozers to cover up the carcasses, and the ones who look for bacteriological material will almost certainly disturb the Gizmos at their feeding, precisely as you disturbed them when you stumbled on the dead rabbits! They'll be angered, and attack. Somehow I've got to make the authorities see sense! Sending unwarned men to bury those animals is murder!"

Lane nodded grimly. Something had drawn his eyes to a distant mountainside, clearly visible where he stood. He watched the mountainside. Only a man with a new and urgent habit of looking for one very special and peculiar thing would have noticed. But there was a vague blurring of the details of the forest on the mountain-flank. The blurring was greatest in the center of a roughly spherical area. It moved, slowly but definitely. It was far away.

"I'm afraid," said Lane, "that their danger is almost unimportant compared to the danger of the rest of us. Look there!" He pointed.

Carol drew in her breath sharply. The Professor looked, and tears of rage and frustration came into her eyes.

"It's the largest dust cloud we've seen so far." she said.

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VIII

THE GIZMOS did not attack. On that same morning Lane spotted a mass-formation of them in motion down a mountain-chain, and radars throughout the United States reported an unprecedented number of slow-moving blips which did not represent aircraft. They were then explained as areas of extra-high ionization in the atmosphere. And this explanation was quite accurate so far as it went. Only—like a deplorable number of scientific explanations—it did not go far enough. It described the approximate cause of an observed phenomenon and blandly stopped there. There was something more than a condition of ionization involved.

Near noon, Lane stopped at a country store and put through a call to his sportsman acquaintance, who headed the research department of a pharmaceutical house. He put it on record that if men sought bacteriological specimens or moved bulldozers to cover up the multitude of dead animals in Minnesota, some of them would fall victims to a supposed plague.

He observed that some of those who wore respirators—biologists seeking tissue specimens—would become victims of the death they tried to understand. But he prophesied that no one would be attacked by the plague while he held a lighted cigar or cigarette in his mouth.

It was a highly reasonable prophecy, but he did not dare say more. After all, less than twenty-four hours had passed since his own first contact with Gizmos. Less than twelve hours had passed since he and Carol and the Professor had routed a certain number—what Burke guessed to be a battalion—of Gizmos with fire, and escaped them. Not six hours ago they'd battled a Gizmo dust-storm and even more recently they'd tolled a Gizmo attack out of a small town by hauling a whining monster in a pillow-case out of Murfree Court House.

The actual history of the past ten or twelve hours was too fantastic to be accepted. The conclusions to be drawn from it could not be accepted unless the events were. Lane carefully withheld anything but deliberately cryptic prophecies he felt sure would be fulfilled.

For many miles, after the phone-call, Lane headed east. Covington lay far behind. The car went through Marlow. Through Clifton Forge. Through open country where skepticism seemed very reasonable. They traveled a gravel-surfaced highway, and the world looked utterly commonplace and comfortable.

Lane saw birds fly up from the roadside. He saw cattle graz-

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ing tranquilly on the rolling fields. There were farm-houses, and he saw a tractor-hauled disk creeping across red-brown soil with a low-lying mist of dust settling slowly behind it. There were buzzards soaring lazily and effortlessly against the blue.

He looked at Carol beside him on the front seat. She smiled at him without words. He looked in the back-view mirror and saw the Professor leaning back in a corner of the rear seat, her eyes closed wearily. By shifting his head he saw Burke. And Burke's expression was one of highly gratified meditation.

Burke said suddenly, "I don't know where the Gizmos are goin' to start, but I figure it'll be all of a sudden. It'll be a surprise attack, smotherin' the cities with rollin' balls of themselves. They'll sweep in, whining, to scatter and swarm into the houses and folks won't know what's happening till they're massacred. It'll be Pearl Harbor all over the country!"

"So you think," said Lane mildly, "that the human race will be wiped out?"

"Mighty near," said Burke with vast confidence. "Mighty near! But there'll be some that'll live. A few! Maybe they'll have a hard time for a while. Maybe there'll be just one little town that'll fight back. There'll be some in it that sure-enough know what the Gizmos are and that fire'll beat 'em. Maybe first they'll hunt in the dead cities till they've got machine-guns with tracer bullets, and when the Gizmos come after 'em they'll have machine-guns shooting fire, and they'll spray 'em with incendiary bombs, and flame-throwers."

The Professor spoke with sudden clarity, her eyes still closed, "The problem is to locate their former place in an ecological system we never guessed at, and do some further research until we find out what happened to it. Obviously, they are natives of Earth."

"Dick thinks they're the originals of pagan gods," Carol said.

The Professor opened her eyes. "It's very likely," she said. "Remember, Carol, that the myths of Greece and Rome were thoroughly fumigated before they were taught you as a dainty cultural subject! The old pagan gods were just as ghastly as the Gizmos. Remember the Gorgons, the Furies, the horrors in Pandora's little black box."

She gazed about her. "I think," she observed, "that we would do well to get ourselves some nourishment. Dick?"

"Next restaurant or lunchroom," he promised.

The car rolled on.

At the next double turn there appeared a barrier in the road. There was a state police officer on guard. He came to the car-window as Lane braked to a stop.

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"The road's closed," said the state cop. "There's a bad smash-up down in the hollow yonder. A big trailer ran off the road, banged into trees, and blocked the way. Then another one ran into it. You'll have to go back and take—hm. Where are you headed?"

"North," said Lane. "New Jersey."

The cop shook his head. Sixty's blocked too. Another big smash-up. You'd better go back through Clifton Forge and take Two-Twenty North. You ought to do all right that way."

"Thanks," said Lane. He turned to back into the farm-gate to make his turn as the truck had done. Then he called, "Aren't there more accidents than usual today?"

The cop said harassedly, "It's the worst day I ever heard of! There've been six bad ones in this county! Worse still, deeper in the mountains. It's like everybody that's driving was drunk!"

The Professor put her head out of a back window. "Anybody killed yonder?" she asked.

The cop spread out his hands. "Everybody," he said. Then he added, "And somebody came by and got out of his car to try to help. We guess that was it, anyhow. And he had a heart attack and died, too."

Lane looked wryly at the Professor. Then he shrugged.

"Look!" he said curtly. "We were in Murfree Court House this morning when a funny thing happened. A man dropped down on the street, strangling. It looked like a heart attack, only it wasn't. Somebody rushed over and waved a lighted cigarette-lighter before his face. Instantly the choking man could breathe. While that was happening, three or four other people began to choke.

"The man, whoever it was, cured them the same way. He said that any time such a thing happened, flames would stop the choking. It did, in Murfree Court House. Something new is causing what looks like heart attacks. Flames near your face stop them. Try it! The man said nobody ever gets an attack like that if he's smoking, either. He said to pass the word along."

The state cop looked incredulous, but he nodded. Lane gunned the motor. When he was headed back down the road along which he had come, the Professor said bitterly, "He didn't believe a word you said. And I'm guessing at something more ridiculous still! Did it occur to you, too?"

Lane nodded, turning to speak to Burke.

"It looks like you read it wrong," he said. "The Gizmos aren't attacking cities. Not yet. They're wrecking trucks and cars, and killing people who get out to help."

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Burke's face was set in stubborn lines. "They're smashing communications," he said. "Like I told you. They'll block all the roads with wrecks, so the people in the cities can't take to their cars! They'll have to stay right where they're helpless!"

Lane nodded gravely. He did not believe it in the least. In some ways the Gizmos acted with remarkable intelligence. To round up small animals like rabbits, for example, and kill them only when a considerable number were gathered in a small place, was behavior admirably suited to the Gizmo way of life. It brought a large store of food to a small area, where many gas-creatures could feed to repletion.

"I tell you," said Burke, with profound gravity and shining eyes," we had better make some better plans than you've got! You don't want to go on to New Jersey! I'm thinking Pennsylvania's the place for us! Find us a little town with some coal-mines we can seal up for the women and children to stay safe in, and you and me teaching the men how to fight Gizmos. Thataway we can hold out forever!"

Lane grunted. "I believe it's standard military theory that a strong offensive is the best defense," he said. "If you want to

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go to Pennsylvania, I'll find an airport or a railroad station and we'll tell you goodbye."

Burke squirmed.

"Stay with us," said Lane, placatingly, "and we'll give you all the information we collect. But we'll leave you wherever you say—at an airport or something similar."

The car rolled on, shabby and only partly washed clean of dust by a thunderstorm which had turned most of the dust to dried mud. There were other cars on the roads of the state and the nation. The radio reported astonishingly many accidents, today. They listened attentively.

By midday the reported traffic deaths in the United States was put at six hundred, which was par for a four-day holiday weekend, but not for a midweek afternoon. It was considered very probable that the tally was far from complete.

When Lane drove into Clifton Forge for the second time, and stopped the car at a restaurant, there was a considerable amount of air-time devoted to traffic accidents on the radio news broadcasts.

Lane listened grimly, at the long luncheon counter. There was a phone-booth in the restaurant. While the others ordered their meals, he called again to New Jersey, to the Deibert Pharmaceutical Company, Inc. His hunting-companion, the research director, was not available.

"I want to leave a message," said Lane briefly. "This is long-distance and it's important. Write it down word for word, please. Here is the message. 'No excess single-car accidents happened while the driver was smoking.' It's from Dick Lane. Can you read it back?" He listened. "Right. It's important!"

He went back to the counter. He told the Professor what he'd done. She looked at him and nodded.

"That's what I should have done!" she complained bitterly. "Instead of letting that idiot at the University take the line that I was a practical joker, I should have made predictions! But I didn't know what to predict!"

"You could ask for checking observations," suggested Lane. "Wire to biologists that a startling fact has come to your attention. Sportsmen report unusual numbers of game animals found dead. Buzzards do not touch what would ordinarily be most attractive food. Say there appears to be a correlation of high mortality in game and a refusal of buzzards to approach bait, in the same areas. Ask them to verify and suggest an answer. Have 'em send their answers to my friend, since we're headed for his laboratory."

The Professor's expression grew more bitter still.

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"I should have realized it!" she protested. "I've been saying for years that your typical scientist will give credence to no theory but his own. But he talks about his theory to distraction! I've been wanting to tell people what *I've* found out, when all the time they've been wanting to tell me! Oh, dammit, Dick, I'm afraid I'm a typical scientist! I'll make out a list of biologists to wire to!"

She began to scribble names on the back of a menu, eating only abstractedly when her food came and paying no attention to anything else at all.

Carol smiled at her, and then looked significantly at Lane. Burke said uneasily, "I don't get that, suh! What's smoking got to do with automobile drivers?"

Lane explained briefly, between mouthfuls. If a flame would destroy a Gizmo, a glowing coal should at least discourage one. The lighted end of a cigar or cigarette being smoked would project into the space a Gizmo must occupy while strangling someone. As a glowing coal, it should kill the Gizmo. Hence it would be nearly impossible for a Gizmo to suffocate a man who happened to be smoking.

"Yes, suh!" said Burke, relievedly. "I see! That's important, suh! Mighty important! But I still don't understand—"

Lane outlined in words of practically one syllable that Gizmos fed upon the carrion-gases that the carcasses of dead animals yielded. Such gases had forerunners—witnessed by the ability of buzzards in ordinary times to detect a dead animal within minutes of its death. But where there were many Gizmos they consumed all edible gases, odorous and otherwise, so that there was nothing to draw buzzards.

Carol said thoughtfully, "When there's more of their particular food than usual, Dick, there ought to be a great many more Gizmos."

He nodded and went on with his meal.

"Because," said Carol, "anything that increased the food-supply should increase the number of Gizmos."

"Naturally," he agreed. "Fish and game outfits work as hard at keeping up the food supply for wild life as at anything else."

Carol hesitated a long time. Burke got up and went over to the cashier's desk. Carol said hesitantly, "I'm wondering . . . There was a species of parrot in Australia that somehow developed the habit of pecking at sheep's backs until they got through to the sheep's kidneys. Which they ate, though their normal food was such things as parrots usually eat. They killed thousands of sheep. Aunt Ann has mentioned it. The whole species had to be exterminated."

Lane nodded again. Professor

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Warren looked at her niece in perplexity. "What's coming, Carol?" she demanded.

"I've been wondering," said Carol. "I'm wondering if that species of parrot multiplied very fast when it found out what an unlimited supply of food it could get by killing sheep."

Professor Warren whooped. The two or three other diners in the restaurant turned to stare at her.

"Out of the mouths of babes," exulted the Professor. "She's got the answer, Dick! No physical mutation—only an instinctual one! The parrots needed no new equipment. Any parrot could do the same, but only those parrots did! So they multiplied out of all reason, and killed sheep out of all conscience, and they had to be wiped out! That's the mechanism by which the Gizmos have appeared, Dick! It's beautiful! It's lovely! Carol, you've solved the problem of the ecological imbalance which has made the Gizmos what they are!"

Her gaze was warmly triumphant. It was bent upon Carol, but Carol looked uncertainly to Lane for approval.

He grinned at her. "Smart girl!" he said. "Now figure out some more!"

She flushed. Burke came back with his pockets stuffed with cigars. He sat down at the counter again.

"I got some cigars, suh," he said. "You' going to find me puffing pretty steady from now on! You better get yourself some too. I don't know what the ladies'll do, but if they stay close to us, and we keep puffing—"

The Professor snorted. "I have a hope in that line," she said darkly," that may prove even more repugnant! But right now I gloat over what Carol has suggested. Do you see the picture, Dick? The Gizmos were a foetiverous race of loathsome descent, consuming bad smells for a livelihood. Then one of them, undoubtedly, found out that the process by which they drew evil smells out of carrion could be used to draw foul breath out of an animal's lungs. *And* that the animal would die immediately, and the enterprising Gizmo could continue happily to feed.

"If he was surfeited at the moment, nevertheless there would be nourishment awaiting him when he was hungry again. It is an exact parallel to a parrot discovering that he could kill a sheep and have a splendid meal. The kidney-eating parrots increased to a multitude. The strangling Gizmos have multiplied into hordes. How or why they contrived their dust-clouds I do not know. But from the tales of *Djinni* traveling in clouds like theirs, it is not a novelty to their kind."

Carol said gently, "But I didn't say all that, Aunt Ann!"

"It was all implicit," said the

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Professor, with satisfaction, "in what you did say. Dick, can we send my telegrams now?"

Lane stood up. He paid for their meal, including Burke's. Burke protested mildly, and then walked quickly on ahead.

They sent the Professor's telegrams and headed back toward Covington. Highway 220 was not far from Clifton Forge. They had passed over this same road only a couple of hours earlier. But they found that a new development had taken place in that interval. There was a station-wagon backed up against a tree beside the road. It had not been there before. It had been stalled by an impact not even great enough to dent its bumper. Its windows were open, but no one could be seen inside. Lane stopped.

"There are blurrings," he said grimly. "Give me one of the gasoline torches, Carol. We might as well try out our armory again."

She gave him one of the gasoline blow-torches he had bought in Murfree Court House. It had not been used there. It was filled and its pressure-pump worked, but it was not lighted. He checked it and got out of the car. He walked toward the stalled station-wagon.

There were very familiar sounds in the air about him. He plucked out his cigarette-lighter and snapped it alight. Then he snapped it out again.

His breath was cut off. Something vicious whined.

He burned it, with the flame of his lighter. There was a tiny shriek and he grimaced at the smell. He went on, and his breath was cut off again. This time he held it while he looked in the station-wagon window. He ground his teeth. He turned about and raised the torch, snapping it on.

The torch burned gasoline. A small air-pump built up pressure in its tank, which fed the fluid through a pre-heated burning-tube. It was not pre-heated now, so a fine thin stream of gasoline sprayed out for several feet. Much of it—most of it, in fact, evaporated before it touched ground. Lane snapped his lighter under the near end of the stream.

There was a *"Whoosh!"* and an uprush of fire. He had touched off not only the liquid gasoline, but the vapor which had almost evaporated. There were thin shriekings, and a stirring of air as invisible things fled away.

Lane opened the station-wagon door. He produced flashes within, clearing it of Gizmos. He closed the car windows and sealed it up again. He was sick with fury as he started heavily back to the car. Halfway there, he heard sounds about him again. He stood still, holding his breath. He felt fumblings all over his body before he sprayed gasoline for the third time and set it off. There was a

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flicker of almost unbearable heat and a dull booming sound, and he stumbled out of the vitiated air and breathed deeply and freely while the high-pitched small screams still sounded.

He reached the car, his features twisted by the hatred he felt. Burke stared at him, puffing furiously on a cigar, his face very pale.

"Dick! What was it?" Carol said anxiously. "Were they—"

"Yes," said Lane thickly. "All dead. I won't tell you any more."

He climbed into the driver's seat and switched on the ignition his lips tight with fury, his hands trembling with his anger.

"You killed a lot of them," said the Professor, regretting that she could offer no other comfort. "I should have tried to catch one. But you killed a great many. I saw them flare up."

"I didn't kill enough," said Lane.

Within a mile there was another wreck. Before he turned north on Route Three Twenty he had passed four more.

It was well into the afternoon before he reached Hot Springs. The highway had been a shambles all the way.

On the outskirts of Hot Springs there was a barrier across the highway. Men with shotguns and improvised surgeon's masks waved him to a halt.

"No traffic!" called one of them from a safe distance. "Quarantine! You can't come through! We're keeping the plague out of this town! Go back!"

IX

THE REACTION of the general public and the duly constituted authorities was absolutely rational, even when it led to moderate-sized towns blocking themselves off from the rest of the world in protection against a nonexistent contagion. After all, for months it had been known that something mysterious was killing game. It was guessed to be a disease. It seemed reasonable to apprehend that it might spread to domestic animals.

Lane backed the car and turned it away from the barricade outside of Hot Springs. Presently he found a minor highway to the left, branching off in an easterly direction. He turned into it. He passed hills and hollows and fields and cosy farm-houses and others not so cosy. He chose his turnings wisely, and presently he was back on Route Two Twenty, on the near side of the tiny War Springs settlement. In the long detour he saw no sign of anything that departed from the commonplace happenings of daily living any summer afternoon in the Blue Ridge country.

Beyond Warm Springs he turned in at a gas-pump in the infinitesi-

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mal hamlet of McClurg. He had definite ideas, born of the barricade and the shotguns, that he should not let his fuel-supply get too low.

Nobody came to the pump. He stopped the motor and got out of the car. There was a sign. "HENS FOR SALE. FRESH EGGS. VEGETABLES." The gas-pump stood in front of a distinctly dingy small store. Still nobody came to wait on him. He listened. There was a loud squawking of chickens somewhere behind the store. Chickens being what they are, sounds of panic among them do not necessarily mean anything at all.

"I'm going to see what's the matter," Lane said over his shoulder.

He went around to the back of the store. There was a chicken-house there, with a long fowl-run under its roof. Behind the coarse chickenwire there was an hysterical tumult. Lane thought he caught the sound of whinings in the uproar.

He called back to the car, "Looks bad! Get set!"

He moved forward. Chickens fluttered in a snowy confusion inside. The chicken-wire, in places, bulged where they threw themselves against it. A man shouted angrily at them.

Lane jerked open the door and went in. A bald-headed man was kneeling close to the wall, pushing chickens aside to get at one which was flapping convulsively on the floor before the roosts. He picked up the struggling chicken, and examined it in concern. To Lane's experienced eye it was obviously strangling. Lane shouted a warning, but the man's face contorted as he suddenly found himself unable to breathe. The chicken struggled free and flapped insanely toward the light outside.

Lane waved his cigarette-lighter. There was a flame and a horrible stench. The man gasped and stared at Lane.

"Come on out!" shouted Lane. "Outside—quick!"

The man blinked, but the squawking din continued without a pause. Something bumped against the man's foot. A white chicken writhed on the floor, suffocating. He bent down, his eyes growing wide with alarm now.

Lane forestalled him. The instant the lighter-flame came near the strangling chicken's head something ceased to flutter wildly and ran out into the yard.

The man gaped. He seemed totally unable to accept so irrational a happening. Lane shook him, but the dazed look did not leave his eyes. There were three more chickens suffocating on the floor. Lane bent and picked one of them up. He held the lighter to its head. There was another momentary flare. The chicken's struggles subsided. He picked up the other two and rescued them in

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the same fashion. It did not occur to him to listen for a small death-shriek.

"Now come with me!" snapped Lane. "It's dangerous here! Do you understand? You're acting like a fool!"

He pulled the bald-headed man outside.

"What—what in hell did you do?" demanded the man blankly. "What's going on here?"

"Some things are after your chickens," said Lane furiously, though his anger was not directed at the man. "I killed four of them. One of them was trying to kill you. Come on, now. Let me show you how to protect yourself."

He heard whinings. Many whinings. The death-shrieks of Gizmos were evidentally signals, audible to other Gizmos despite louder simultaneous outside sounds.

Lane seized his companion by the arm. "Come on!" he snapped. "Run!"

But the bald-headed man instinctively resisted. And then it was too late. There were whinings in the air all about them. Gizmos arrived in numbers and Lane felt them touching his body in a dense, deadly aggregation that forced him back against the wall. A wild fury filled him. As the bald-headed man struggled for breath, his face contorted, Lane forced his own arms through the fluttering resistance of the blanketing swarm.

He put a cigarette in his mouth. When his lighter flared, flames leaped upward palely, and there was a shrill small shrieking high above his head. He breathed malodors, and lighted the cigarette. He took it in his left hand and stabbed with it at the empty air, again and again.

It was a desperate expedient and it was only partly effective. The glowing tip of the cigarette killed Gizmos, to be sure, but not nearly fast enough. But Lane was no longer acting as a rational human being. He was filled with an impassioned, consuming hatred. Since he could not destroy them all, he was compulsively driven to inflict as much damage as possible.

The Professor was suddenly at his side.

"Dick!" she pleaded urgently. "I want to catch one! I need a specimen for Washington—"

She waved the freshly-unfolded pillowslip, and an unlit gasoline blow-torch. It was more insane than Lane's own folly, of course—the sort of insanity which comes of obsessive zeal. She saw Lane struggling at the center of leaping, bluish flames, but paid no heed to the strangling bald-headed man. She dropped the blow-torch and waded into the viciously whining aggregation about Lane. The Gizmos were dense enough

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to blur the sharp outlines of the wire fence.

"Got him!" muttered the Professor, her voice incongruously exultant.

At that moment Carol came running with a brazing-torch, and Lane picked up the gasoline burner. He sprayed gasoline to right and left. Carol fired the torch and jumped quickly back as the flames leapt high. Shriekings sounded while Professor Warren sturdily twisted a bag in which something invisible and unspeakable throbbed and made shrill noises. In the car on the far side of the store the dog's frantic howling rose above the din.

It lasted for a very long time. But finally, the flames dwindled, the Gizmo death-shrieks died away and the throbbing thing in the pillowcase shrieked alone. The outlines of trees and leaves and branches stood out clearly again. Carol removed her finger from the trigger of the brazing-torch and looked at Lane, her face as pale as death. A wind came from somewhere and blew away the foetor of dead Gizmos. The dog in the car howled on.

Lane took a deep breath, trembling, staring down in tight-lipped concern at the bald-headed man who lay sprawled out in the middle of the floor.

"I've been pretty much of a fool," he said.

"We wiped out a whole swarm, Dick!" said the Professor. "Not a big swarm, maybe, but we wiped them out!"

She added shakily, "And I've still got my specimen."

The bald-headed man stirred, groaned, opened his eyes. He stared vaguely for an instant. Then a look of stunned horror came into his eyes.

"You're okay now," Lane said reassuringly. "When you get your breath I'll tell you exactly what happened and how to keep it from happening again."

"I must have had a heart attack!" gasped the badly shaken poultry breeder, "Get me to a doctor!"

"We'll take him to a doctor," grunted Lane, "No sense leaving him alone! This could happen again! I'll get the car."

He went to the front of the store. Burke was in the driver's seat, ashen-white with fear. He was racing the motor, his hands frozen on the steering-wheel. Every window was shut tightly. On the floor the dog still howled, its ears oddly flattened.

Lane filled the tank with gasoline, and pushed Burke into a back seat. He drove the car painstakingly near to the bald-headed man, who seemed hardly able to stand. It occurred to him that they were making some progress at least—thanks to the Professor's near-insanity. They now had a Gizmo, captive. They could call

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others at will. There could be a public demonstration which could not fail to convince police and newspapermen, and the public health authorities.

They loaded the poultry breeder in the car, ignoring his insistance that he must remain absolutely limp, to avoid another heart attack. He gave them the residence address and phone number of a doctor and Lane started the car.

As they sped along the highway Burke said, "This here Gizmo in the pillow-case—right now it's calling its friends to come help it!"

"It is," confirmed the Professor. "And if they come, it will be a consummation devoutly to be desired."

"But they could be dust-storms," protested Burke. "Migawd, Mistuh Lane! You're telling 'em to come after us!"

"Exactly," said Lane, grimly. "Precisely as the men in that small town you're going to organize will tell them. *To be killed.*"

He heard a chattering between the dog's doleful howls. Suddenly Professor Warren said, "Dick, I want to make what you may regard as a hopelessly unscientific experiment. Will you help me?"

"Go ahead," said Lane. Then he saw another wrecked car a mile ahead, and drove carefully to encircle it. He said, "Carol, help your aunt."

The Professor dived down among the wildly-assorted parcels in the back of the car. She came up with the brown-paper bag she'd filled in the grocery store in Murfree Court House a few minutes before the Gizmo attack.

"I want to try a ghost-repellant," said the Professor without a trace of embarrassment. "It might work on Gizmos."

"Good Lord!" muttered Lane. He drove past the wreck and Carol did not see it. "Apparently modern science sometimes takes a serious view of even the ghosts it doesn't believe in!"

"Nonsense!" said the Professor impatiently. "This isn't science! It's the purest superstition. But old wives among the Boers were putting bread-mould on wounds for generations before penicillin was thought of! This is a superstitious talisman—used very often to repel ghosts and devils by primitive tribes all over the world."

She brought out a clove of garlic, pearly white in hue.

"Ghosts," she went on, "are said to hate the smell of asafetida and garlic. In the Middle Ages people used to wear asafetida in bags around their necks, probably because it smelled even worse than garlic. I'm going to see if this particular clove stirs up our discontented prisoner."

While Carol held the neck of the pillow-slip bag, she thrust in her hand, and did not immediately

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withdraw it. The captive thing throbbed and whipped about inside the bag. But it's whinings did not change pitch.

Finally the Professor withdrew her hand, while Carol kept the prisoner fast. She painstakingly broke the clove of garlic and rubbed it over her skin. Then she inserted the garlic-smeared hand into the bag again.

There was something like a Gizmo convulsion. The thing in the pillowslip made a noise so shrill that it was almost a whistle. It beat back and forth inside the confining cloth. It raged. It fluttered. The Professor withdrew her hand and it continued to bulge and beat the cloth wall about it. The sight was singularly revolting to watch.

"Garlic was said to drive away devils," said the Professor, making no attempt to hide her exaltation, "*because it actually drove away Gizmos*. We now have the strongest kind of supporting evidence that ghosts and devils and Gizmos are one. Do you realize, Dick, how completely conclusive our research becomes—almost minute by minute? Now we have a complete defense against Gizmos! There's wild garlic everywhere! If people simply smear it on themselves—"

The dog howled again. Carol carefully knotted the neck of the pillowslip bag. She passed it to Burke, over her shoulder. She bent down to try to comfort the dog. He would not be comforted. The thing in the bag made noises like shrieks of rage. They scared the dog most hideously.

The car rolled on. The bald-headed man moaned feebly, "Get me to a doctor. I had a heart-attack . . ."

Lane stared attentively in the rear-view mirror. Suddenly he asked, "Does the way behind look a little bit blurry, Carol?"

Carol turned about to stare. She nodded gravely. "Yes. A swarm of them is following us," she said. "The agitation of the Gizmo in the bag must have stirred them to fury."

Burke jerked the cigar from his mouth. Frantically, he presented its burning end upon the pillowcase. The cloth scorched and gave way. There was a flame and a small shriek and an almost intolerable stench filled the car.

"I killed it!" muttered Burke. "You—you can't call Gizmos in my car!" His face was flushed, his jaw was set. "It's my car! You ain't goin' to call Gizmos to it!"

Lane said nothing. The thing was done. There was nothing to be gained by reproaching the man. He drove on. The Professor compressed her lips and looked daggers at Burke. Carol cranked down a window until the air inside the car was clean again.

"Are they still following?" Lane asked.

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"Not now," said Carol. "I can't see the blurring."

"Then that's that," said Lane levelly. A little later he swung on the wheel. "That could be the doctor's house over there," he said. "Just around that next turn."

It was very near to sunset when they turned into the driveway of a neat home set well back from the road, just where the outskirts of a very small village began. All the world was filled with that odd carmine light which sometimes at sundown seems to make the world vastly more beautiful than at any other time.

The Professor got out of the car to help the bald-headed man to the gravel driveway. But he was so invigorated by the nearness of medical attention that he got out unassisted, and then was astonished that he did not drop dead.

"Come along!" growled the Professor. "Dick, you keep an eye on Burke. I'm going to see if anything at all can be done. We know how people can protect themselves now."

Lane nodded The Professor walked with the blad-headed man to the door of the cottage, and accompanied him inside.

Lane lighted a cigarette. Carol looked at him unhappily. Burke, in the back seat, remained grimly silent. To the west, the crimson of the sky grew deeper above the dark blue of shadowed mountain-flanks.

"A beautiful sunset," said Lane, without interest.

"Yes," said Carol. Impulsively, she touched his hand.

In the back seat, Burke seemed desperately anxious not to call further attention to himself. When his cigar burned short he took out another and lighted it with painstaking attention. He tried to be very quiet while cranking down a back window far enough to toss out the butt.

The sun set. There were small twilight noises. A dog barked, a long distance away, and a bird called in the lonely half-light. The car, cooling off, made small snapping sounds. A vagrant night-wind, blowing over newly-cut grass, brought fresh and fragrant cool air to the car. In the back, Burke smoked a far-from-excellent cigar.

Night fell, while Professor Warren and the bald-headed man remained in the doctor's office.

Sunset moved across the nation. Everywhere the situation was confused, unresolvable into simple statement.

Meanwhile, in the cottage, Professor Warren had done her best to save at least some few lives by explaining and convincing a country doctor that Gizmos were deadly and very real.

She did not come out of the doctor's office immediately, for she had a great deal to explain. Lane and Carol waited for her,

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while the sunset colors passed their greatest intensity, and faded, and night crept over the valley. They remained acutely aware of Burke's presence in the back seat. His cigar-smoke was hardly fragrant, and from time to time he stirred restlessly.

But for him, the young night might have seemed enchanted. The only light came from the stars and the bright rectangles of windows in the doctor's home. Glimmers from other houses in the village were widely-separated and indistinct.

Somehow they were not too impatient to go on. They talked very quietly, though always with Burke disturbingly in mind. Neither of them could have told how it happened, but they were closer together than they'd been when actually on the move. And of course they said nothing that Burke could not hear. He heard everything. And once, without any actual reference to Burke's shortcomings as an individual, Lane said angrily under his breath, "Damn Burke!"

In the obscurity of the unlighted car Carol smiled up at him. Her fingers, intertwined with his now, tightened just a little.

A moment later the front door of the doctor's cottage opened wide, pouring lamplight out into the darkness, and Professor Warren emerged. She came to the car and got in.

"You can go on, Dick," she said. "I convinced the doctor. He had a dozen frantic calls while I was in there. I must have talked for ages—and he gave some excellent advice to his patients about Gizmos. I couldn't have bettered it— knowing what I know. It'll do some good, unless stupid neighbors shame his patients out of obeying him. I urged him to check my results, but he believed me. He's actually read some of my published papers. Quite a biologist. So he called the editor of a Roanoke paper whom he knows personally. He told the man who I was, and that what I said was true."

She complained, "Why don't you drive on, Dick? There's nothing to stay here for!"

Lane started the motor and drove out on the highway. He headed north. He'd been on the go for something over thirty-six hours without relaxation of any sort. There was a place called Monterey where there were several good inns and restaurants. He estimated the distance. Perhaps an hour. Possibly more.

"Go on!" said Lane. "What about the newspaper?"

"I was interviewed," said Professor Warren bitterly. "On the doctor's telephone. Quite a clever young reporter! He got all my facts straight, but he didn't believe a word of my story. He asked to talk to the doctor again. The doctor swore at him and told him that

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he was a complete fool. But it did no good."

Her voice hardened. "No, wait —it did *some* good. The reporter got his editor on the phone, and he agreed to publish my story. It will be printed in tonight's and tomorrow's papers. The wire services will pick up some sort of garbled version of it. It will be printed as a freak. But Dick—"

"What?" asked Lane. But he could almost guess.

"The headline," said the Professor bitterly, "will be, SPOOKS AT WAR WITH HUMANS, SAYS PROMINENT WOMAN SCIENTIST." Then she added more bitterly still, "I wish I could resign from the human race!"

Lane found himself wondering whether it wasn't an entirely rational, scientific attitude to take, at that. The newspaper couldn't be blamed at all.

That night though, a new sort of evidence appeared to make it rational to look at Gizmos differently. The new evidence was indisputable. Plus what Lane and Professor Warren and Carol had to say, it probably determined the outcome of the war.

X

THE CUSTOMARY confusion in human affairs, of course, reached a new high during the night. Hot Springs, Virginia, was not the only town to respond to the new threat. But it was the earliest to react because it happened to be a resort catering to visitors who were heavy spenders. By quarantining the outer world, Hot Springs became apparently a safe place for them to do their spending.

Lane was able to buy a newspaper.

He learned that yesterday radar reports in Chicago had announced something mysterious moving upwind across Lake Michigan at roughly thirty miles an hour. There was a bulbous head and a trailing, tenuous tail. The tail was reported to be ten-twenty-thirty miles in length. The report came on radar-screened tubes. These tubes were excited by accelerated electrons whose pattern of impact was governed by echoes from the original shape of the image.

Electrons are not affected by panic. Phosphors do not imagine. Half the available striking force of a nearby Chicago air-field went aloft. They found it and they found nothing. Ultimately they plunged into it, backwards and forwards and sidewise. There was no perceptible thing to cause the phenomenon.

They knew then that the radar-received object was too huge to be affected by planes flying through it. Hours later, the wave descended—upon the Chicago stockyards. Confined in pens, the already-doomed cattle bellowed

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and lowed as whinings descended upon them. When morning came the stockyards were filled with murdered cattle and sheep. Gas-masked police and firemen and doctors from the hospitals gingerly examined the scene.

Another story quoted from a group of vociferous persons who demanded that war be immediately declared upon Russia—because when something inexplicable took place, the Russians must have done it.

Every city in the country had adopted its own special emergency regulations.

The newspapers ran out of space for large-type headlines and had more or less to confine themselves to printing the facts. It was quaint, though, that a freak-fill news-story from Roanoke, Virginia was crowded out of type altogether. Even following editions had no room for it.

They spent the night at the only motel in Monterey, with The Monster in the room occupied by Carol and the Professor, and Burke snoring heavily between nightmares in the room with Lane. When morning came, it developed that there had been so many traffic accidents in Virginia that the governor of West Virginia had ordered the border between the two states closed to traffic. The order was illegal, but it was rigidly enforced.

Lane abandoned Route Two

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Twenty and headed east for the Shenandoah Valley. He was stopped by a barrier and guards at Staunton, and navigated narrow country roads around the city to be stopped again at Harrisonburg, where a trigger-happy guard put a bullet through the top of the car's windshield.

They made a tedious, time-consuming detour around Harrisonburg, and lost three hours trying to get up on the Skyline Drive, which did not pass through any towns and might give them a clear run for a reasonable distance. They did not make it. They plodded through more back-country lanes, instead.

New Market was tranquil. There were dogs and children in plain sight, and people moved naturally about. There was no sign of anything inconsistent with a perfectly commonplace small town on a commonplace summer day. But Luray was blocked to traffic. They found it out because of another attempt to reach the drive or to cross the Blue Ridge. Again they wandered interminably along back country trails.

More than once they forded small brooks and followed meandering wheel-signs, only to arrive at a farmhouse beyond which that road did not go. Then they had to backtrack and try another fork.

They had been travelling fourteen exhausting hours when they reached Strasburg. They rested there, again, but at four next morning they were on their way. The only news they heard was from the car radio. It pictured public confusion spreading in waves, sparing a few towns, but not many. Chicago had not been the only city to become the target of a radar-reflecting cloud of Gizmos.

The confinement pens in the Kansas City stockyards were a shambles throughout. Shipping-pens in Texas had been visited by whinings heard above the bellowing of maddened steers. In the corn belt, cattle fattening for market died by the hundreds, and the St. Louis hog-market had been attacked by another cloud.

They'd planned to head for Winchester and then travel on to Washington. Professor Warren's professional reputation was sound. She had only to explain and offer to demonstrate her discoveries to convince the right people on the highest governmental level. But Lane still held his own contact in reserve.

As they pulled out of the sound-asleep town of Strasburg at four o'clock in the morning an all-night radio reported that the Rock Creek Park zoo, in Washington, had been visited by a radar-reflecting cloud which came upwind across the Potomac and wiped out the entire display of animals.

The news broadcast went on to announce that inhabitants of the

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city were already streaming out on every highway, and that the planes which had tried to break up the cloud with explosives before it reached the city had failed. Bridges and highways were already filled with heavy traffic, and no serious attempt was being made to check the exodus.

Lane listened grimly. "That changes our plans," he said. "We don't go into Washington."

"But it's of vital importance, Dick," she protested. "After all, I am not unknown! Let me have a half hour's talk with a competent biologist in—say—the Department of Agriculture, and I guarantee he'll listen. I know they're busy now in the laboratories twenty-four hours a day. And they'll keep right on working."

Carol said quietly, "Aunt Ann."

"What?" snapped the Professor.

"You didn't hear why Dick doesn't want to go into Washington."

"There'll be martial law by daybreak," Lane said dryly. "They'll call it a Civil Defense emergency. But they're going to have to stop people running out of the city—probably all cities."

"But that doesn't—" She stopped, staring hard at Lane.

"Day before yesterday," he said evenly," there were well over a thousand victims of single-car traffic accidents which we *know* were caused by Gizmos. Yesterday was certainly no better. Did you hear any reference to traffic accidents in that broadcast?"

"No, I didn't." The Professor was appalled. "Do you think it was so bad they're censoring the news? Could they be afraid to let people leave the cities, and also afraid to tell them why?"

"I think," Lane told her, "that I don't envy anybody in authority the decisions he has to make. It's going to occur—it's already occured to a lot of people—that the 'radar-reflecting clouds' which kill beasts in stockyards and zoos can also kill human beings. So they'll want to get out.

"If Gizmos are killing people on the highways, they should be made to stay at home. But if you tell them the reason, they'll feel that they're doomed either way. And you take a city like Washington, with the slum-population it's got, and make its people believe they're doomed . . ."

Carol said steadily, "Aunt Ann might call in and have someone come out to meet her—"

Professor Warren interrupted her, her voice suddenly less firm. "I didn't think! Of course I can't take Carol into Washington if the people there are going crazy with fear!"

"Not all of them will react that way," Lane said. "There's a part of the population which will react in the modern, adjusted, socially acceptable way to a situation which distresses them. Unfortu-

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nately, some of them may have to make decisions and they'll want to be calm when they make them."

The car rumbled on for a moment. Then Carol spoke again, "Tranquilizers?" she asked.

"Exactly," said Lane. "Precisely like the old tales of seamen breaking into the whiskey-stores in time of shipwreck. Very helpful—when brains are needed!"

They were perhaps ten miles out of Strasburg now and they had not yet met more than two pairs of headlights all the way. Here the highway dipped down, to rise again two hundred yards farther on. There was a brook and a bridge across it at the bottom of the depression. It was a completely commonplace spot on a perfectly ordinary highway, with the only oddity the earliness of the hour and the unearthly before-dawn chill which seemed to hover everywhere. There was actually a vague mistiness down in the hollow.

But Lane had been given pause by the fact that the mistiness was not still. It writhed and stirred and seemed to be possessed of a boiling motion. His eyes glanced sharply at the rising part of the road beyond. In the headlight rays it was blurred. The headlight beams, streaming from the car, seemed disturbed in their course by something that distorted the light. The something was like—small columns of heated gas.

"Get your torches ready," ordered Lane, abruptly.

He trod down on the accelerator. The car went downhill, gathering speed. It went through the beginning of the mist and the fuzziness. Instantly angry whinings sounded on all sides. But the car gathered speed on the level bottom place, while the whinings grew shriller and angrier. Sparks flashed inside the car. Carol struck the igniter of a brazing-torch, and a flame sprang up.

Carol waved the torch and something flickered into blue flame. There was a stench. But the whinings grew to a keening howl. Something clapped itself over Lane's nose and lips. He held his breath and drove on furiously. The car breasted the rise beyond the hollow, and roared away on the level highway beyond. Its speed went up and up. It was fifty miles an hour when Carol speared the darkness before his face, and something screamed and flared.

"Thanks," said Lane coldly, as wind whipped away the reek of carrion. "They may follow for a little way. But we're all right. Better see how things are in back."

The Professor complained bitterly, "I could have caught another specimen! But I didn't have a pillow-case ready!"

The Monster howled frantically on the floor in the back of the car.

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"Burke?" said Lane sharply. "Burke!"

Carol swung about. The brazing-torch flames again, stabbing at the emptiness that hovered just before Burke's fear-crazed face. He was clutching at his throat. There was a flicker of light and he collapsed into shuddering limpness. The car sped on.

The pattern of Gizmo action was now becoming clear. They were social creatures in the sense that they moved and customarily fed in groups or herds or flocks. But all along Lane had been mistaken about one thing—the Gizmos were neither intelligent nor purposeful. As is usual among all social creatures, at any moment there were individuals separated from their fellows, and they would commit individual atrocities. Some, on the other hand, would be surfeited, and therefore not passionately interested in hunting.

But they all would tend to hunt by night and feed by day. In their native forests they drifted in grisly, faintly whining masses, flowing invisibly between the trees and through the underbrush. In a sense they grazed, in that they sought their subsistence on a broad, deep front, on which they murdered every bird, every animal, every insect. When they found running animals in any number, it was their custom to envelope them—to surround them: to round them up into terrified groups whose frenzy made them mutually prevent each other's escape. Then the Gizmos killed them.

It was an admirable device for food-gathering. Lane pictured the over-all situation as one in which such masses of invisible horrors flowed slowly and terribly here and there and everywhere. They would be attracted from many miles by the faint scent of stockyards downwind. They would go blindly to that scent of prey. They had attacked this car because it disturbed them. But, mindless as they now appeared to be, they killed human beings. Because they were capable of rage. They furiously attacked any place where one of them was held captive. They acted as if they were capable of an enormous vindictiveness.

Rage, indeed, might have substituted for reason to make them trail Lane and his party. Maybe their dust-globes were anger-phenomenon. Fury, after hearing the death-cries of their fellows, might have produced the dust-cloud formation over the filling-station.

But Lane, driving through the dark, did not think of such fine details. He imagined creeping, crawling crowds of Gizmos flowing across the countryside, killing living creatures as sheep will nibble every blade of grass. If such a swarm should flow into a city—

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XI

THE ACCEPTANCE of telephone calls from the country districts—in fact all long-distance calls other than official ones—were stopped. This was to keep panic being conveyed into the cities from the open country. When Professor Warren tried to make a call to Washington, she was politely told that no trunk lines were available. The same thing happened each of the other six times Lane stopped the car at a back-road garage or store where a telephone might be found.

"We just heard a news broadcast," Lane told her, when she came fuming out to the car after the seventh attempt. "Now there's no reference to the trouble in St. Louis or Texas. Maybe they think people will forget if they ignore it. And the business in Chicago is played down. It's said that bacteriologists think they've isolated a suspicious germ. Last night it was thought to be a Russian trick! There's still no mention of any unusual number of traffic deaths. Two-thirds of the broadcast dealt with foreign news."

"And I can't get a line in to Washington," said the Professor bitterly. "I don't think we'd be allowed to enter the city anyhow! Drive on, Dick! I've given up on trying to attend to this affair reasonably. But we have to do something!"

"We will do something," promised Lane. "We'll stay out of cities."

The Professor's latest failure happened a few miles out of Winchester. She tried again in Martinsburg, where there appeared to be no inclination to keep anyone from driving through. They got a meal there which was a very belated breakfast, but no line to Washington.

This was the third day of their attempt to complete what should have been one day's long drive. It was almost a repetition of the first. They could not go through Hagerstown. They lost hours finding a way on unmarked roads to circle the city. Chambersburg was blocked, too, and they had again to make a long detour. Lane was tempted to try the Pennsylvania Turnpike, but when he bought gas in a cross-roads group of houses called Green Village, he was informed that the Turnpike had been closed. "Quarantine or something," said the man who worked the gas-pump.

Lane asked questions. Dairy-farms in Chippensburg had lost all their cattle during the night now past. Two men lost their lives with the animals. It occurred to Lane that the relatively small loss of human life was due to the exact fact that the Gizmos were mindless. As scavengers, they'd found food in the carcasses—whole or scattered—of dead wild

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creatures. As hunters, they still associated food with fur or feathers or the chitinous shells of insects. They would attack men, as was proven, but their first instinct and preference was for lesser creatures.

Lane turned east. Now he avoided main highways altogether. The car moved on roads barely indicated on maps, or not at all. When a good highway appeared, Lane doggedly turned aside or else crossed it quickly and dived into obscure lanes again. He worked steadily toward the east. Three times he passed through areas—one was four miles across—in which no bird called or insect sang. Once he passed the still-looking embers of a farmhouse which had burned to the ground without any attempt by anybody to salvage anything. There was a dead horse in the pasture to its left.

In late afternoon, squadrons of planes appeared overhead. Once Lane heard a far-away droning, and presently discovered a helicopter hovering somewhere. A little later the car reached a hill-crest. Far away, there was a billowing puff of smoke. It was repeated. It spouted up from a highway which was black with cars beyond it.

"Stopping traffic," observed Lane. "Probably these are from Harrisburg. They would pick a four-lane highway! They're being stopped so they won't be killed on the roads. Of course, if a feeding horde of Gizmos came on them stopped as they are—" He let the words hang.

He searched out a way with his eyes. He drove on. Presently he scuttled across the empty part of the blocked road and dived into a dirt lane on the other side. This was between Harrisburg and York, Pennsylvania. The highways nearer Lancaster were practically empty. Either the police had acted more quickly, or there were fewer exit-highways to block.

He got to northward of the closed Turnpike by rushing through a minor underpass, and headed eastward again. It was definitely not sensible to try to pass through Philadelphia or to try to get into New Jersey to the south of it. Near Reading he came upon solid masses of cars crawling away from Philadelphia. There were dented fenders and smashed windows and windshields in surprising numbers among them.

"There's been fighting somewhere," said Lane. "Burke, here's an item you overlooked in your plans for a fortress invincible against Gizmos. How'd you defend that town of your against humans?"

Burke spoke garrulously, but there was no conviction in his voice, now. He'd seemed to shrink in the progressive unfolding of the

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situation the Gizmos had created. At first he'd swaggered. Now he was almost pitiably dependent upon Lane for leadership.

"I've got a hunch," said Lane before Burke could finish. "Counting what the news reports have told us, and the great deal more they haven't, I have a hunch that my prophecies to Jim Holden have him pretty well convinced that I know what I'm talking about."

Carol said, "Holden?"

"Friend of mine," explained Lane. "We've hunted together more than once. He's head of research at Diebert Laboratories. He's the one we're headed to see."

Professor Warren said in startled disbelief, "Jim Holden? Is that Dr. James Holden? The Perkins Medal man? The one who made the report on adaptation of living tissues for transplanting? Good heavens, Dick! Do you know him?"

"I suppose it's the same man. Why?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" demanded the Professor indignantly. "We've wasted time! If I can talk to him for half an hour—knowing my work as he must—he'll put his laboratory and his staff at my disposal! And with such a team as he and I will make—why, we'll have a definitive, documented report on Gizmos ready within days."

Lane turned in his seat to stare at her. He was blankly, honestly amazed. Professor Warren had shared every experience of Gizmos he'd had. But it was suddenly and startlingly clear that as a biologist her concept of Gizmos was totally unlike his. She probably knew more about their metabolism than he could guess, and undoubtedly had a clearer idea of the pattern of motion which kept their gaseous dynamic systems in being. It would be a highly complex system, vastly more complicated than a smoke-ring. It could vary for locomotion, for hunting, and in response to stimuli from without.

But when she thought of Gizmos, she thought of them in terms like that. And Lane was a hunter and a fisherman. He thought of the way creatures acted. In consequence, while the Professor looked forward to a completed examination of Gizmos, Lane was guessing what they would probably do next.

And it seemed to him the most obvious thing in the world. From the fact that deaths among game animals had been rare in the beginning, and more and more frequent later, Lane had formed an opinion.

The really alarming phenomena attributable to Gizmos which had turned up only within the past week confirmed it. He made a grim evaluation of the fact that until three days ago only people

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interested in game conservation and animal husbandry were concerned with Gizmo affairs, while now there was censorship of news concerning them, and restriction of civilian movements, and frantic scurrying for promising courses of conduct, and all the phenomena of war.

The state of affairs at the moment, to Lane, made it look as if the Gizmos would be forced to attack human cities and human lives everywhere within so short a period of time that it could be measured almost in hours.

The reasoning was absolutely simple. Living creatures with ample food and no enemies increase in number by geometrical progression. If there had been only one hundred Gizmos in the forests of America, say six months ago, then five months ago there might have been ten thousand, four months ago a million, and three months ago a hundred million. Two months ago ten thousand million Gizmos might have gone totally unseen in the wildernesses of North America. They were invisible, and they fed quietly upon the gases given off by the decaying corpses of things they had killed.

That could have been a month ago. Now a hundred times as many could not stay in the wilds. There wasn't enough food for them. They had to come out. Domesticated animals would stay their hunger only so long, because it was very highly probable that as they fed they multiplied. All the animals of ploughed ground and pasture would feed them only briefly. Not months, not weeks even. Days. And two days—three—were already gone.

So Lane couldn't imagine a research project upon Gizmos, to establish the situation with fine precision before large-scale combat bagan. There was no time to set up a research team with scheduled conferences, and a division of the whole problem into neat research-projects requiring experiments and control-experiments and reports to be evaluated at later conferences.

"I was thinking," said Lane, "that I might possibly be able to reach him before I can get to his place. People might not be allowed to telephone into the cities to tell of the terror outside, but it's conceivable that one can telephone from one small town to another. I'm going to try."

He stopped at a closed-up country store. Its windows were barred, and its doors padlocked. A dog growled from underneath its porch, and a window opened on the floor above. A shotgun barrel peered out. The dog barked angrily.

"Store's closed," snapped a Pennsylvania Dutch voice. "Go away or I shoot!"

"Ten dollars," said Lane evenly,

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"to use your telephone. You can hold your gun on me while I do it. I do not want to buy anything. I only want to use your phone."

There was argument for a moment—angry, suspicious argument. It was Carol who made the conclusive appeal. She did not look like the companion of a suspicious character.

So Lane made his call. He was able to do so because not all trunk lines are carried underground into large cities on heavy cables. Lane got the Diebert Laboratories through three separate small-town exchanges, and talked to his friend Dr. Jim Holden over a connection which sang and hummed and was otherwise unsatisfactory. But he still could hear the explosive relief in Holden's voice when he learned the identity of the caller.

Lane's prophecies had been borne out. All manufacturers of biologicals had been kept informed of all events, for their own information when a break in the situation came. They could ask questions. On the basis of Lane's prophecies, Holden had.

Lane's prediction that some men would be stricken while operating bulldozers in Minnesota had been borne out. But men smoking cigars or cigarettes were safe while smoking. But only then. Lane had predicted it. And he had left a message for Holden that no excess single-car traffic accidents would happen while the drivers were smoking. And this was so far beyond reason that when it proved to be true the head of the Diebert research laboratories was given furiously to think. The more he thought, the more feverishly he waited for more information from Lane.

Lane talked incisively. Holden was eager to listen and now prepared to try out anything Lane might have to suggest. The phone connection was bad and grew worse. The singing of the wires sounded something as if Gizmos might be on the line. But Lane was able to talk at length, and to give assurance that he was on the way.

When he went back to the car, a Pennsylvania Dutch housewife was talking to Professor Warren from the upstairs window. As he settled into the driver's seat, she said with satisfaction:

"*Ja.* Garlic. My *grossmütter* used to say that spirits would run from garlic. I try it. *Danke*!"

Lane started the motor while the Professor defended the woman.

"It's true whether it's scientific or not. And if she calls up her friends and tells them, it may save some lives!"

Carol looked hopefully at Lane.

"Holden said," he told her, "that there've been animal deaths near his plant. He'll try to catch a Gizmo, with everybody smoking

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cigars. Once he does that, everything's in line. But we want to get there. Fast! I've warned him that a swarm will come running if one Gizmo's trapped." He looked at the sky. "It's late!"

He sent the car down the road with a cloud of dust following it. And it was now close to sunset, and the time for Gizmos to hunt food was nearer. He knew, in fact, that many of them were seeking food in the daytime already and that their hunger for the unspeakable was greater today than yesterday. And by tomorrow?

The situation was better in one respect. The public might believe in an animal plague, but it also believed in a deadly entity which reflected radar-waves and destroyed animals and men by night. Therefore there were not many cars moving in the darkness. Country-dwellers stayed home.

Would-be fugitives from cities, blocked on the highways by implacable armed men, were afraid to be alone in their blacked-out vehicles. They gathered in groups. They broke fences and built fires. Others came to them, and more fires were needed, and made.

Along the highways on which men were forbidden to flee, those who had tried to run away clustered about great, leaping flames and took comfort from the light and their own numerousness. This was a very wise thing for them to do. It was the wisdom of savages who keep fires burning in their camps at night to drive away evil spirits. The fires did deter the Gizmos,—and the smell of men was not their first choice of prey.

And he came to the Diebert Laboratories, thirty miles from Trenton. Burke slept noisily in the back seat. The Monster slept, and dreamed, and yelped feebly in his slumbers while Lane slowed and searched for the road-signs that would guide him to the laboratory's very door.

The dog waked, and suddenly gave tongue to terror. He howled in the closed-up car.

"Holden must have things stirred up." said Lane. "It does seem as if we ought to be somewhere near the plant." He peered into the light cast by the car's headlights. "Hm. That roadsign says a right turn." He swung the car. "There are the buildings ahead, I'd guess. Only—"

He whistled softly as the buildings of the Diebert pharmaceutical laboratories came more clearly into view. There were some lights inside. The remotest parts of the headlight only faintly lighted the highly modernistic main building, but it could be seen that it was blurred. It was out-of-focus. The private industrial roadway led straight to the plant, but nothing was distinct. The buildings looked, somehow, like drowned things regarded through rippling water. Yet there were lights.

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Carol matter-of-factly lighted a brazing-torch. She turned its flame on the perforated burner of a gasoline blow-torch and brought it up to temperature. She turned on the gasoline. It caught with a fine roar and a fierce blue flame. She handed it to the Professor. She prepared a second torch. When Lane glanced at her she smiled briefly.

"I don't know how much longer the brazing-torches will run," she said. "But the gasoline ones will run two hours."

"I," said the Professor firmly, "shall get out a pillow-case!"

Lane drew a deep breath. He headed for the building which seemed to be submerged in something which made light waver and wabble and put all things out of sharp focus. A structure housing some hundreds of people was immersed in a Gizmo horde many times greater than even the Chicago swarm. They were still. They enclosed, they encapsulated the entire structure. The humans inside the building must suffocate eventually.

"I think," said Lane urgently, "we'd better open the car windows. These torches probably give off carbon dioxide. We'd better not breath too much of it. We might suffocate."

The car went on. The air seemed to thicken, to become viscous. It was the Gizmos, of course. They were incredibly packed. They were drawn to the building in numbers and in density and in sheer monstrous masses such as even Lane had not imagined before.

Carol cranked down the right-hand front window. She thrust a flame out of it.

It leaped up and forked and spread horribly. It seemed that the very sky above them took fire. In a sense, it did. And there was suddenly a screaming, unearthly outcry which would have been earth-shaking but for its shrillness. The air about the car was convulsed. Close-packed Gizmos strove to flee, and created whirlwinds and horrible gusts which shook the car, and always, always, there was a gout of fire coming from the right-hand front window. That flame rose heavenward and the burning sky split asunder and masses of flame raced madly in all directions. Above all there was a whining and a keening and a sound of horror through which The Monster's howlings were very trivial noises.

Then there was a very, very horrible reek of dead Gismos, and there ceased to be an upward spout of flame from the torch Carol kept roaring out of the window.

The car went on to the buildings in what seemed an enormous silence. Lane honked the horn. Lights came on, outside a door.

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The four of them got out of the car.

Doctor Jim Holden appeared when the door opened as the bearers of torches reached it.

"It looks like a trick we didn't think of," he said calmly. "We've been working on something more technical. We loaded a dead cow on a handler-truck, with all of us smoking cigars, and we left it a while and then brought it into a small laboratory we had ready. There were Gizmos—your term, Lane—feeding on the carcass, and we had them where we could work with them. They protested, and their friends gathered around. They've been protesting for hours and their friends have still been coming. We hadn't quite solved the problem of the ones outside when you turned up. Come in! Let's get this business going all over the country. I like the way you do things, Lane."

Lane heard Professor Warren snort. Carol pressed his arm, confidently, smiling up at him. He introduced Professor Warren.

"How do you do?" said the Professor briskly. She extended an object she'd brought from the car. "I have a present for you. A Gizmo, freshly-caught in a pillow-case and now confined in a small garbage can. It's in very good voice."

IT WAS A near thing, of course. It has since been demonstrated that Gizmos multiplied by an involved sort of gaseous fission, so that when a single Gizmo settled down to a full meal of their nauseating nourishment, two Gizmos rose up. Their rate of increase was astronomical. That Friday night, when Lane and his party arrived at the Diebert laboratories, was literally the last minute when it could be hoped to prevent at least a holocaust of human beings and possibly the extermination of animal life on all the continents.

But it was extraordinarily simple to handle the matter, once it was attacked by technical means —which made it convincing—instead of grimly personal battle with flames and torches. At the laboratory they already had tape-recordings of the cries of Gizmos held captive and enraged. And Holden had an open wire to the authorities who'd asked him to be on standby in case they found an answer. He passed on the answers that came in quick, minute-by-minute succession in the laboratories.

It is a matter of record that Lane arrived at the laboratory a little after eleven p.m. Eastern Daylight Saving Time. Much that Lane had reported was already passed on. By midnight, daylight saving, transcriptions of the Gizmo cries were being made at Army bases and military installations and Air Force fields and

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Civil Defense headquarters all over the country.

By twelve-thirty a.m. those hair-raising noises were being played over public-address systems in ball-parks and amusement parks—where there were no paying customers this night—and wherever loudspeakers could be set up. Loudspeaker trucks posted themselves at the edges of cities and played the siren song of rage.

And Gizmos came. And then they were worked upon by flame-throwers and torches, and fireworks where such things were available. Later the speakers were mounted near great fans whose revolving blades cut through the whirling gaseous dynamic systems and chopped them to bits exactly as they would have chopped up aggregations of smoke-rings. That they were lethal to Gizmos was demonstrated by the truly awful reek downwind. On airport tarmacs, loudspeakers called Gizmos from the sky to be shattered by the blades of idling propellers.

Swarms were tolled to destruction in Newark, New Jersey, and Poughkeepsie, New York, and Yonkers and Hartford and Boston and Pittsburg. There were clouds of whining things which turned to foetor when attracted and suitably treated in Des Moines and Memphis and Altavista and Las Vegas. There were monstrous stenches—at which wise men rejoiced—in Tallahassee and Laramie and Salt Lake City and Missoula and San Diego and Omaha and Houston and Cincinnati. . . .

Nobody has ever estimated the total maximum number of Gizmos. They were very difficult to wipe out. For weeks, helicopters droned above wildernesses giving out the sounds which, because they expressed frenzied rage, brought frenzied invisible monsters to join them—and to die. Actually, there was a report of an isolated band of Gizmos in the Dakotas more than three months later. But they were adequately taken care of.

The War With the Gizmos ended in a victory for the humans, of the only kind which amounts to anything in these modern days. One side was wiped out. Exterminated.

Which, of course, ended the matter. There were some very trivial things which turned up later. Burke, for example, proposed honorable matrimony to Carol, who was at least as much astonished as amused. He explained hopefully that the two of them could go around the country organizing people to defend the nation against Martians or Jupiterians if they should ever invade Earth again. Carol declined. The Professor wrote a magnificent book on the fourth kingdom of nature—the others being animal, vegetable, and mineral, and the fourth being gaseous.

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And Lane. . . .

When the tumult was over he asked Carol where she lived.

"With Aunt Ann," said Carol, "wherever that may be."

Lane grimaced a little. "What," he asked, "would be a good alibi for me to go wherever that might turn out to be? I mean—well—we were talking the other night, and Burke was there, and I damned him thoroughly for it but—well—" He stopped.

Carol said carefully, "No. I'm not engaged. Or anything, Dick."

Lane drew a deep breath.

"Swell!" Then he said, "We've only known each other three days, but I'm concerned about The Monster. Somebody ought to make a home for him. I'll—well, I'll make some temporary arrangement for him, while I hang around . . . Er, my intentions are honorable."

He grinned, suddenly. She smiled back.

She put her hands in his.

NEXT ISSUE'S COMPLETE NOVEL

WALL OF FIRE

by CHARLES ERIC MAINE

It was a good will gathering, a drawing together of the enlightened, the barbaric and the strange. From every inhabited planet they came, these visitors to Earth's golden age of science. But from Saturn came the strangest race of all, and none could remember having invited them!

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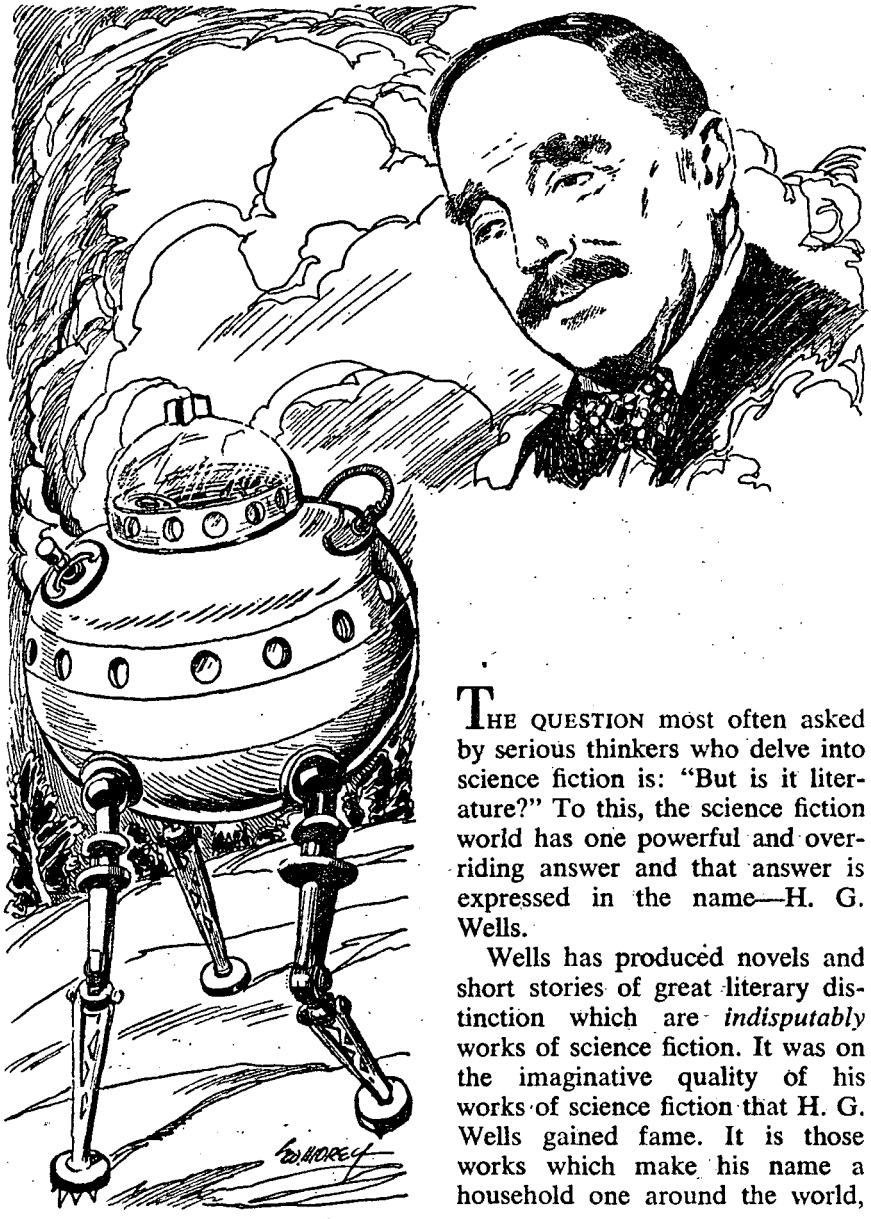

THE QUESTION most often asked by serious thinkers who delve into science fiction is: "But is it literature?" To this, the science fiction world has one powerful and overriding answer and that answer is expressed in the name—H. G. Wells.

Wells has produced novels and short stories of great literary distinction which are *indisputably* works of science fiction. It was on the imaginative quality of his works of science fiction that H. G. Wells gained fame. It is those works which make his name a household one around the world,

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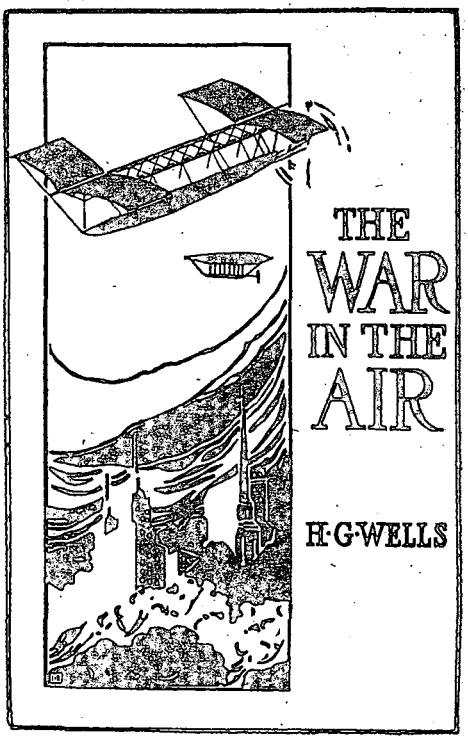
THE WONDERS OF H. G. WELLS

Wells was a brilliant sociological satirist. But his science fiction novels have enhanced his present-day fame.

by SAM MOSKOWITZ

Cover of the 1908 MACMILLAN book



despite the fact that the bulk of them were written more than fifty years ago.

When H. G. Wells was born in Bromley, Kent, England, in 1866, the French master of science fiction, Jules Verne, was already an outstanding world-wide success, with his *Voyages Extraordinaires*. Verne had written and scored with *Five Weeks in a Balloon, Voyage to the Center of the Earth* and *From the Earth to the Moon*.

Thirty years later, in 1896, when H. G. Wells burst on the literary horizon, with *The Time Machine,* to remain a brilliant first-magnitude fixed star in the firmament of masters of the scientific fantasy, Jules Verne was still alive and still writing. That very year Verne had published *For the Flag,* a tale of a yacht that car-

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ried a detachable submarine, which employed super-explosives, devised by a mad French inventor, to blow up most of the fleets of the world.

Though tapering off in the presentation of really powerful imaginative concepts, and flanked by dozens of imitators and acolytes, Verne still reigned supreme in his field, though such titans of fantasy and science fiction in their own right as H. Rider Haggard and A. Conan Doyle already displayed the potentiality to supplant Verne as the master of science fiction. Except for personality preferences and timing they might have earlier smothered Wells bid for fame in the realm of scientific fantasy.

Haggard created a sensation with *King Solomon's Mines,* published in 1885, and followed it with his now classic novel of immortality, *She,* which appeared in 1887. In the years that followed Haggard poured out a procession of literary successes, but his interests caused his fantasies to take a different turn. A lawyer by profession, and, when he took pains, an author capable of biblical, almost poetic prose, Haggard merely toyed at the fringes of science fiction, preferring the color and drama of ancient Egypt, the wilds of Africa and South America and the unprovable realm of mysticism.

As a writer of tales based on geography, Haggard was quite a match for Verne. Had he written more science fiction, his superb characterization, his classic sense of drama and his fine imagination would have made him Verne's successor. Instead, he preferred to pioneer and explore a peculiar literary nook on his own based on the pageantry of the past, lost races and civilizations, reincarnation—all leavened with an occasional sobering dash of science.

At the time Well's *Time Machine* appeared, A. Conan Doyle had already assured his literary immortality with the creation of Sherlock Holmes. He ventured also to write historical novels but he had an astonishing predilection for the supernatural considering the fact that Sherlock Holmes was basically a wedding between a detective and science. He also wrote science fiction, but in this early period they took the form of short stories making up a very minor place in his writing. Had A. Conan Doyle written his Professor Challenger novels before 1895, he might have added to his laurels the mantle of Jules Verne. As it was, he wrote too little science fiction at first and then much too late wrote his famous novels, *The Lost World* and *The Poison Belt,* in the years 1912 and 1913 respectively. By that time, he could not hope to gain serious attention, pitted against the brilliant works

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produced by H. G. Wells in the realm of science fiction.

Throughout his long literary career, H. G. Wells stoutly denied any suggestion that he was influenced in any way by Jules Verne. Wells once wrote: "There's a quality in the worst of my so-called 'pseudo-scientific' (imbecile adjective) stuff which differentiates it from Jules Verne, e.g., just as Swift is differentiated from Fantasia—isn't there? There is something other than either story writing or artistic merit which has emerged through the series of my books. Something one might regard as a new system of ideas—'thought' ".

He stormed at the characterization of himself as the 'English Jules Verne,' and repeated to the end of his days that if there was any strong influence reflected in his work it was that of Jonathan Swift, the satirist of *Gulliver's Travels*.

In all truth, Wells could not afford to permit the idea to circulate that he was in any fashion an imitator of Jules Verne. The shadow of Verne's success, particularly in his early days, threatened to obscure his own, merely because they both wrote science fiction.

For his part, Verne recognized the fact that Wells seriously threatened the one great distinction he possessed, that of being a fictional prophet and seer.

In commenting upon Wells' work Jules Verne said, in an interview published in *T. P.s Weekly* in England, for Oct. 9, 1903: "I do not see the possibility of comparison between his work and mine. We do not proceed in the same manner. It occurs to me that his stories do not repose on a very scientific basis. No, there is no rapport between his work and mine. I make use of physics. He invents. I go to the moon in a cannon-ball discharged from a cannon. Here there is no invention. He goes to Mars in an airship, which he constructs of a metal which does away with the law of gravitation. *Ca, c'est tres joli,* but show me this metal. Let him produce it."

The truth of the matter was that neither of them was on very firm ground. Proof that Verne exerted some influence on Wells is quite apparent in the text of *The First Men in the Moon,* where the inventor of the moon space ship, Cavor, is asked how it will be possible to get in and out of the vessel and is given a description of an airlock, and after his reply the questioner comments: "Like Jules Verne's apparatus in *A Trip to the Moon?"*

Wells, on the other hand *did* use a *gun* in firing his Martians across space in the story *The War of the Worlds.* In Chapter 7 of that novel, where English survivors of the Martian invasion are trying to

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muster hope for their situation, we read:

"After the tenth shot they fired no more—at least, until the first cylinder came."

"How do you know?" said the artilleryman. I explained. He thought. "Something wrong with the gun," he said. "But what if there is? They'll get it right again."

The impression that Verne attempted to convey that Wells' material was not true science fiction because it did not minutely stick to the rules of scientific accuracy is an unfair one. Verne's scientific knowledge was obtained from his personal observations and wide reading; by occupation he was a lawyer. Wells, to the contrary, had a fine scientific education under the instruction of one of the greatest scientists of his day, T. H. Huxley. In a good many respects his knowledge of science was *superior* to that of Verne's.

To top it off, Wells was more than a writer, he was an artist, using words to paint a picture and when the spirit moved him, brilliantly poetic in his evocations of the strange, the unknown and the unusual. As an innovator of new plot themes for science fiction, he ranked supreme and the years since his passing have secured that distinction for him beyond any possibility of dispute.

However, he refused to limit the scope of his story-telling or of his imagination because of scientific technicalities. Verne, who would not permit his characters to land on the moon, because he could not contrive any known scientific method of having them take off again from that satellite or send their messages back to Earth, regarded Wells' anti-gravity metal in *The First Men in the Moon* as placing that novel outside the pale of respectable science fiction. Yet it enabled Wells to land his characters on the Moon, return them to Earth and give the reader some of the finest bits of otherworldly description that have ever appeared in an interplanetary novel.

Verne had good reason to stay within bounds. His formula had earned him the plaudits of the masses around the world. It is little wonder that in his later years he came near to throttling his talent with imaginative restrictions for fear he would kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

Verne would never have considered a device as questionable as a time machine. Wells not only considered it, he was obsessed by it. The idea originated with *The Chronic Argonauts*, published in the April, May and June, 1888 issues of THE SCIENCE SCHOOLS JOURNAL. Wells condemned his early attempt as an "experiment in the pseudo-teutonic, Nathaniel Hawthorne style," and in later

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years bought up and destroyed all copies of the early version he could find, making it a rare collector's item.

A second version of *The Time Machine,* titled *The Rediscovery of the Unique,* appeared in the July, 1891 issue of THE FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW. Wells, in a later statement, said he did not think that any copies survived.

A third try, *The Universe Rigid,* was set up in type for THE FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW but was never run off.

In 1894, a series of articles, containing sections from *The Time Machine,* appeared in THE NATIONAL OBSERVER.

The near final version was *The Time Traveller's Story,* published as a serial in THE NEW REVIEW during the years 1894-5. This version is a real collector's item because it contains at least one episode which was not published in the book. A segment referring to descendants of man, built somewhat like kangaroos and giant centipedes that preyed upon them.

The first American edition of *The Time Machine* is distinguished by the fact that the author was referred to as H. *S.* Wells throughout the book.

This chronology of *The Time Machine* is important because that story has generally come to be regarded as H. G. Wells' greatest work, a work which has already become a classic of world literature. This story, like most of the other science fiction tales of Wells, makes it difficult to raise any argument to shade the fact that it is *primarily* a work of science fiction.

While the concept of the time *machine,* which Wells was the first in the history of literature to use, though other authors had traveled in time through other means, is highly unlikely, Wells nevertheless attains willing suspension of disbelief through the use of actual scientific theory.

This tale, which carries its hero first to the year 802,701 and then by hops to the year 30,000,000, when the sun has grown cold and man extinct, is not used as a vehicle for presenting Utopian concepts, since the civilizations described are decadent and degenerating. It is not a warning story, since the period in which it is laid is long past the peak of man's future Golden Age. Nor is the slightest attempt made at satire.

Projection of the sciences of physics, biology, astronomy and chemistry are integral to the narration of the story. Though there is depth of thought and concept, the *story* always comes first and is a fascinating chronicle; beautifully, superbly written. Most important, it is a *science fiction* story, because the events that occur could not possibly have been

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related in any other literary genre.

A special point is made of this fact because it is the habit of the public and some of the literary men upon reading really outstanding works of science fiction such as *Brave New Worlds* by Aldous Huxley or 1984 by George Orwell to say in effect: "That isn't really a work of science fiction, basically it's an allegory." Even more prevalent is the phrase: "Well, that isn't science fiction. It's *good!*"

Through the use of this weird logic, whenever a work of science fiction is truly outstanding, it ceases to be science fiction. Thus denuded of its masterpieces, the field is then usually challenged to prove its worth.

Wells, the master writer and prophet of the field, has become the margin of respectability for science fiction as a *literary* craft.

World events have vindicated the *subject matter* of science fiction for Wells and the hundreds of other writers who also used future invention, atomic power and space travel as basic ingredients of their fiction. Today, the rise and fall of nations and the very survival of mankind depends on how well the world understands those very topics that were previously championed primarily by writers of science fiction.

Science fiction, thereby, reveals itself as being something significantly greater than a literature of escape. To deny that fact is to deny that the hydrogen bomb exists and that the dawn of space travel has arrived.

Proper credit has never been extended H. G. Wells for his major role in the development of the British short story. Probably the only British writer at the turn of the century who surpassed H. G. Wells as a writer of short stories was Rudyard Kipling and as a writer of short science fiction stories, Wells has never been eclipsed.

Undoubtedly Wells' greatest short story is *The Country of the Blind.* Though intended as an allegory it can be appreciated on the merits of the story alone and either way it emerges as a profound and stirring work. The story deals with a valley whose original settlers were attacked by a rare malady which gradually blinded the entire population. The valley is completely cut off from civilization by natural upheavals, and the people, though blind, gradually adjust to their environment, as their other senses become more acute. The blindness is hereditary and after a while the concept of sight becomes meaningless. A man from the outside world stumbles into this valley and instead of being able to seize control by virtue of his sight he finds himself regarded as an abnormal, not-quite-sane "unformed" person. He falls in love with a blind girl who

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wants him to have his eyes put out so that he will be "normal" and fit into the social structure. At the end of the story he escapes from the valley.

The Country of the Blind originally appeared in the April, 1904 issue of STRAND MAGAZINE. Thirty-five years later, in 1939, Wells rewrote the ending, adding 3000 words, and this version was published in a limited edition of 280 copies by the Golden Cockerel Press of London. It also was included in a collection titled *The College Survey of English Literature,* edited by B. J. Whiting and published in 1942.

In the revised version, the hero vainly attempts to save the village from a rockslide he sees is about to start. They do not believe him. He escapes from the valley with his blind girl sweetheart and they are later married. The girl rebuffs attempts on the part of the doctors to restore her sight, simply because she is "afraid" to see.

While the new version is as well written as the old, the allegory becomes so labored that it destroys the impact of the original story, which is probably why anthologists have generally ignored the revision.

In most of his short stories, Wells strove for a single departure from the norm, with all other elements kept in focus. His stories were characterized by the high originality of their central themes and the wide range of ideas. Today, most of the ideas that Wells presented have been rehashed dozens of times. At the time he wrote them, they were either completely original or the first really well-done presentation of the concept.

Among the short stories with ideas that have become part of the fabric of modern science fiction are the following: *Empire of Ants,* in which the ants threaten to conquer the world; *Flowering of the Strange Orchid,* which deals with man-eating tentacled plants; *The New Accelerator,* concerning a drug which can speed up the motions of men dozens of times; *The Remarkable Case of Davidson's Eyes,* about a man who could see through walls; *Aepyornis Island,* which sees the ancient eggs of extinct creatures hatched; *The Star,* in which a wandering body from space almost collides with the earth; *The Crystal Egg,* which is really an interplanetary television receiver; *The Grisly Folk,* a tale of prehistoric people, and quite literally dozens of others.

His mind seemed a bottomless well of diverse and new—for his time—scientific ideas. Virtually no other writer of science fiction possessed his versatility.

The success of *The Time Machine,* and the originality of this continuous stream of short science fiction stories, created a tremendous demand for Wells' work.

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Jules Verne had raised science fiction to the level of popular reading and H. G. Wells not only kept it there, but gave it literary standing.

The very popularity of his short scientific fantasies emboldened Wells to work them in longer lengths. *The Island of Dr. Moreau,* an extraordinarily well-done story reversing an incident in Homer's *Odyssey,* where Circe, through the use of a vapor, changes Ulysses' men into swine, finds modern science, through surgery and glandular injections, turning animals into human beings. Essentially this is a scientific horror story and one of such impact that at first publishers rejected it, and when it was finally published, outraged voices were raised against its theme. Yet time has given it stature because of the consummate skill with which it is related.

The Invisible Man, published in 1897, was an instant success and is undoubtedly the finest work ever done in a fictional vein on the subject of invisibility. When made into a motion picture in the United States, it had the bizarre aspect of making a renowned star of a man whose face was not seen until the last sequence of the picture—Claude Rains.

The War of the Worlds, which appeared in book form in 1898, scored an immediate and deserved hit. Wells was by this time a world-wide figure. The great imagination and literary artistry he displayed in tale after tale were as much a wonder as his subject matter.

It is hard to believe, but *The War of the Worlds* appears to have been the first science fiction story written about the invasion of the earth by creatures from another planet bent on conquest. The theme has been done so many hundreds of times since then, that Wells' own originality is lost sight of.

While *The War of the Worlds* was running as a serial novel in America's COSMOPOLITAN MAGAZINE during the latter part of 1897, the distinguished United States astronomer and popular science writer Garrett P. Serviss wrote a sequel to the story, titled *Edison's Conquest of Mars,* which ran serially in the newspaper, THE NEW YORK JOURNAL, starting Jan. 12, 1898. It related how Thomas Alva Edison and a group of other scientists, built a fleet of space ships armed with disintegrator rays and traveled to Mars to punish the Martians for their abortive invasion of the Earth. This is a striking example of the impact *The War of the Worlds* had on first publication and how popular and newsworthy H. G. Wells had become.

The effectiveness with which Orson Welles employed the theme of an Invasion from Mars in 1938 to scare the wits out of a nation

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in a radio broadcast, underscores the vitality of the work, which, though it has dated to the point where we know that modern science would have made short work of Wells' Martians and their robots, the novel continues to be reprinted, read and even brought up to date for motion pictures.

With such a string of true classics of science fiction behind him, Wells is to be excused if he stumbled with book publication of *When the Sleeper Wakes,* in 1899. That novel, despite extensive revision, was, as Wells so aptly put it: "one of the most ambitious and least satisfactory of my books." A tale of a man who falls into a state of suspended animation and awakes in the future, to find a world in which power is vested in the hands of a few men, devolves into a somewhat tedious muddle of sophomoric socialism.

The publication of *The First Men in the Moon* in 1901 did much to take the bad taste of *When the Sleeper Wakes* out of the mouth of the reading public. This was the first of Wells' books to be filmed, it being produced by J. V. L. Leigh for the Gaumont Film Company in 1919. The film was a rather unimaginative and tasteless transference of the story to celluloid.

The mature Wells chafed at being typed as a scientific romancer. While he boasted of the pains he took to make his tales scientifically plausible, and claimed for them merit beyond that of entertainment, he felt barred from making a contribution to mainstream literature. To the author Arnold Bennett, popular at the turn of the century, he wrote: "I am doomed to write 'scientific' romances and short stories for you creatures of the mob, and my novels must be my private dissipation."

Finally the main-stream novels poured forth. The brilliant *Tuno-Bungay;* the popular *History of Mr. Polly; Kipps, Ann Veronica, The New Machiavelli,* and many others. Most of them were timely hits. They blasted at the prejudices and inhibitions of the period. They rocked the people out of their warped ideas of righteousness and displaced smugness and complacency with indignation and doubt.

Interspersed between the novels were non-fiction works by H. G. Wells on the future of mankind and various aspects of socialism. He was becoming more and more convinced that he had a message to impart to the world. Though the scientific fantasies continued to come, *The Food of the Gods* in 1904; *In the Days of the Comet* in 1906; and the truly prophetic *The War in the Air* in 1908, which clearly foresaw the dramatic change the airplane would make in future

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warfare; and though a number of marvelous collections of short stories and a few out-and-out fantasies such as *The Wonderful Visit* and *The Sea Lady* appeared with them, it became evident that the tenor of Wells' thought was changing.

As clearly evidenced in *The War in the Air,* he was displaying a tendency to halt his story to deliver a sermon, although he should have had ample outlet for his ideas in such non-fiction works as *Anticipations, The Discovery of the Future,* and *New Worlds for Old.*

Already impatience had overcome him. Whether in a scientific-fantasy, such as his master-prophecy, *The World Set Free,* published in 1914, wherein he predicted the atomic bomb and world destruction or his "realistic" novel, *The World of William Clissold,* appearing in 1926, he could no longer be bothered with the story. He had to stop and deliver sermons. Interminable sermons and often boring sermons.

He never quite realized that fiction was not the way to get his educational job across to the masses. *The Outline of History,* the first of a trilogy in which he tried to impart a factual picture of what the world and mankind was like and how business and science fitted into the scheme of things, sold millions of copies and made him more money than the hard-cover sales of most of his other books combined. The other two volumes, *The Science of Life,* in collaboration with Julian Huxley and his son G. P. Wells and *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind,* by their only slightly less enthusiastic reception should have proved to him that sugar-coating was extraneous if he really had something to say.

One by one his once-famous mainstream novels dated and dropped out of print until only *Tuno-Bungay* and *The History of Mr. Polly* any longer received serious consideration in literary circles.

Yet, ironically, the scientific fantasies of his youth, the scientific romances which he felt had so constrained him, refused to die. Wells often denied that he was destined to be read by posterity. Though he referred to himself as "only a journalist," it would have been less than human on his part not to have hoped that his "mature" novels would have made a lasting mark.

That Wells was completely aware of the development of science fiction in recent years is provable by the fact that 26 of his novels, novelettes and short stories were reprinted in AMAZING STORIES between 1926 and 1930 and one in SCIENCE WONDER STORIES. There were also reprints of his tales in WEIRD TALES and GHOST STORIES and he

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must have received copies of these publications.

Then there is the letter received from him by Festus Pragnell, British science fiction author of *The Green Men of Graypec,* which was first published serially in Gernsback's WONDER STORIES, and then reprinted in book form in England under the title of *The Green Men of Kilsona.* A lead character in that story was named H. GeeWells and evoked the comments: "Dear, Mr. Pragnell, I wanted something to read last night and I found your book on a table in my study. I think it's a very good story indeed of the fantastic-scientific type, and I was much amused and pleased to find myself figuring in it." Wells signed his name "H. GeeWells," as Pragnell had used it in the story.

Perhaps it was instances like the above, that prompted Wells to turn half-heartedly towards the scientific fantasies of youth during the late thirties. Perhaps it was the obvious longevity of his work in this vein. Perhaps it was an attempt to regain some of the optimism lost because of old age, ill-health and the way the world was going, but from his pen (and Wells wrote all his first drafts in long hand) came *The Shape of Things to Come, The Croquet Player, Star Begotten* and *The Camford Visitation.* It was no use. Uniformly they were marred by preachments.

One thing these later science fiction stories did have in common with the old was the fact that the lead character was generally the unusual phenomena or world catastrophe, rather than any individual. Though a master of the art of making people come alive from the printed page, Wells failed to produce a single character comparable to Jules Verne's Captain Nemo, skipper of the marvelous submarine Nautilus in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Beneath the Sea.*

Despite this, except for his most badly dated works, (paradoxically also his most prophetic, *The War in the Air* and *The World Set Free*) nearly all of Wells' novels and short stories of science fiction and fantasy are still in print and continue to be read. It is not the ideas that keep them alive, nor their pointed warnings to civilization, nor their sensationalism, but the word-mastery of a literary genius, who took the elements of the scientific "boys' tales" and "thrillers" and created permanent and enduring literature.

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Story of a Man Who Came to Loathe His Own Era by

JAMES E. GUNN

The only trouble with time travel is that you can't take anything with you. In the case of this traveler, it was a blessing!

THE REASON IS WITH US

THESE ARE THE *things you do:* Naked, you arrive inside the warehouse. You are naked, because you can take nothing with you, just as you can leave nothing behind. Those are the two natural rules of time-travel.

You choose the warehouse instead of the Center, because you are no longer an agent of the State, although They do not know it yet. Soon They will know it, and the search will begin. You put on the clothes you have cached in the warehouse. You pocket the few dollars you have managed to put away, one at a time, on your previous trips. You walk confi-

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dently along the dark streets, until you come to the rooming house where your room is waiting.

Thus you find a hiding place.

It is not a perfect hiding place, because there are none. There is no place They cannot find you if They want you badly enough. They will want you. Your example is deadly, and you were Their best agent. You know too much about the fulcrums, the pivotal points of history, upon which rests the precarious past—and, hence, the precarious present—of the State. They do not know that you are concerned with only one thing—yourself.

So you find a place where They will have to hunt a long time, hoping They will get tired of hunting before they find you.

You choose the twentieth century. It is a natural choice—it is your specialty. You know it as if you had been born of it, instead of the State. You have lived in it, for years, adding up the durations of all your missions. You were assigned to it as a child of the State. You studied its languages and customs along with your own. You protected the fulcrums from the tampering of enemies of the State. You lectured on it to classes of Leaders, Unrestricted. You perverted it for the history books of the masses. It was your second home.

Slowly, its freedoms began to counteract the poisons of your lifelong indoctrination. Slowly, you began to think for yourself, to compare, to dread your return to the State. Suddenly the balance was broken. You planned your escape.

It is not the best era for concealment. Regimentation has begun. Identity must be certified. Papers must be filed, here and there. And, because it is your specialty, They will search it hardest and longest.

Against that, you weigh your knowledge and your desires. Of the two, perhaps your desires are the heaviest. Technology and art are sufficiently developed to provide you with conveniences and entertainment. Freedom is playing its last great role on the stage of decision. The State lurks in the wings. You must be in the audience.

You settle in a large city, in the free half of the world. Strangers are common in large cities. You establish an identity. You get a job as a clerk in a bank, doing sums on a machine that you could do more quickly in your head. It is monotonous and uninspiring, but you do not mind, because you are fully, *really free,* for the first time in your life. The only shadow on your freedom is the knowledge that you are hunted. They are hunting you, up and down the ages of the world. It is a small price to pay.

You live in your room for a

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few months, but you know that this is only temporary. Single, friendless men are obvious misfits. You must complete the camouflage. You look constantly for a girl. Your task is difficult, not only because you are a stranger, but because there are strategic requirements to be met, psychological problems to be overcome.

Finally, by accident, you meet again the girl from the government office. She is friendly, but not overcurious—pretty but not beautiful. She is modest. She might marry a bank clerk. Her name is Lynn.

You find that your fears were wasted. Physical contact is not distasteful. Lynn's necessary modesty makes her difficult to arouse, but, at last, you are successful. She consents. You are married. You have been frugal. You can afford a down payment on a house.

After a difficult few days, Lynn seems happy. You are happy. Biological mating is not repulsive. On the contrary, you begin to see that the State method of compulsory exogenesis is part of a complex pattern of breaking all ties except those which bind the citizen to the State.

Child of the State, you think, *born from a bottle, reared in a crèche; you have traveled a long strange road, but the destination is in sight.*

As soon as possible, you tell Lynn you want a son.

You relax, just a little. So far, you have not made a mistake. In a few months your camouflage will be complete . . .

These are the things you do not do—you do not let your knowledge of the future lead you into any of the simple traps. You have traced others, through seemingly minute political, economic, or social perturbations. You are an ordinary citizen of the twentieth century United States. You act like an ordinary citizen, a timid one.

You do not bet on horse races, boxing matches, football games or elections, even though you know who will win. You do not invent miraculous little gadgets. You do not plagiarize remembered fiction or poetry under a pseudonym. You do not write anonymous letters to statesmen, politicians or newspapers. Your only source of income is your job. You do not lust for money, power or fame. Your only desire is to stay alive and be free.

You do not seem strange, foreign or different. You dress like your neighbors. You speak as they speak. You are pleasant, without inviting close friendships. You laugh at your neighbors' jokes. You echo their opinions on fishing, golf and baseball, on prices and the weather, on the President, foreign policy and the cold war. You do not have opinions of your own.

You do not own a car, a gun

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or a dog. Immediately after every snow, you shovel your walks carefully. You do not have parties or play your television set loud or sing in the bathtub. You are the last one on or off the subway—if a train is crowded, you wait for the next one. You wait scrupulously for stop lights—only when the street is clear, do you cross.

You do not take chances. You do not walk beside buildings under construction. You do not get into arguments. You do not enter saloons. You do not drink. You do nothing which might bring you into contact with the police.

You do not let your guard down for an instant, not with anyone, not even with Lynn. You do not hint, even by the twitch of an eyebrow, that you are smarter than you seem, that you know more than you should, that you could change the course of history. You are an average clerk, with an average education and average opinions, living in an average house with an average family. No one could be more average.

You do not confide in anyone.

You read the papers and see the fulcrums passing, one by one, fulcrums which lead surely to the State you have fled—but you do not lift a finger to interfere. You are not afraid that your existence is dependent upon that of the State, for you are firmly fixed in the twentieth century. But you know that there are hidden agents around each fulcrum. On some occasions, you were there yourself. The paradox does not disturb you—it is only superficial. You might be successful, but you do not take the chance.

You do not visit a plastic surgeon or a tattoo artist. You are never undressed in front of anyone, not even Lynn, when the light is on. You dress and undress behind a locked bathroom door.

No one ever sees the indelible imprint just under your armpit—TA: 1-4537-A. Lynn's modesty takes a similar form, and she sees nothing strange in your actions.

Always alert, eternally watchful, you do not wonder if what you have is worth what you must pay for it. You know—it is worth it.

And this is what happens to you—one afternoon at work, while you are idly tapping away at the keys of a tabulator, an envelope is dropped in front of you. You glance over your shoulder. Weasel-faced Colbert, the department supervisor, is standing there, frowning at you. You are not supposed to receive mail at the bank. You shrug helplessly at him, and he moves away, muttering soundlessly.

It is a plain envelope with no return address. For some reason, a tremor, quickly stilled, runs down your arm as you pick it up. Your face, however, is only curious. You tear open the end of

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the envelope calmly and shake out the letter. You open it. It is typewritten. There is no signature. It says—

TA:1-4537-A:

You are known. Prepare yourself for return. Do not try to escape in any way, or the punishment awaiting you will be even greater.

You snort. "I'll be damned!" you say. You will indeed.

Someone is breathing in your ear. You glance to your left at Julie Friedman, who is reading the letter over your shoulder. Her dark, pretty face is alive with interest. You shrug at her, puzzled.

"Isn't that funny?" she says.

On your right, Ted Hamm looks up, preoccupied. "What's the matter?"

"Some practical joker," you say, and toss the letter to him.

While he reads it, you look around. Colbert is watching, glowering at you. You shrug again and get back to work, but your back is cold, from the nape of your neck to the base of your spine.

But you play your part. You must always play it, as you have decided, clear to the end. You are surprised that you are so calm. It has come, and you are not frightened.

Perhaps, it is because you know that They are not certain. The letter was a mistake. It told you that They were suspicious, and it told you that They weren't certain. Their mistake. You will not jump or run. You will not prove Their suspicions. They do not dare make a mistake. The State is intolerant of mistakes, and the fabric of time is fragile. You, if you are innocent, might be a fulcrum. The limitations on time-agents are sharply defined.

You have thought of Them as They, but there is only one. You know that. Agents do not work together—they would be too busy watching one another. And it is unlikely that the agent who suspects you has reported to his superiors. Reporting is a difficult task, at best, and it is not wise to report the possibility of success when there remains a chance of failure. Failure is the State's major crime.

One person remains between you and safety—and he has made a mistake. You know he is watching. If you can get rid of him, it is probable that you will never be bothered again. But, first, you must pick him out. You must make absolutely sure.

Your fingers punch the keys automatically. Three persons were close when you received the letter—Colbert, Julie, Ted. The chances are great that the agent is one of those three. A casual glance could not have pierced your disguise. It had to be some-

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one in frequent contact. You have no friends. *Colbert, Julie, Ted . . .*

Colbert—sour, friendless, always snooping. You have known many like him in the service of the State. But he is middle-aged, and he has spent years with the bank. It is an argument for his innocence, but not a complete one. The State does not balance effort against results. The State would sacrifice twenty loyal agents to get back one stray, and a properly indoctrinated agent would think nothing of putting the welfare of the State above his desires, his distastes, his life.

Julie—the State has women agents. You have heard of them, although you have never met any. Julie does not look like the sexless women of the State you have known, but they would be worthless as agents. From the first, you could not fathom Julie. Sometimes she was friendly, sometimes cold and distant. You had considered Julie as a possible mate—but it would have aroused too much interest in the office. Everyone would have been too friendly. Thinking about it, you shudder. Perhaps, you were that close to proposing to an agent.

Ted—after a moment's consideration, you discard him. He is too frank, too ingenuous. He has shown you pictures of his wife and three children, newspaper photographs of himself on the gridiron. Automatically, you checked up on those. It could not be Ted. The wife and the children were positive proof.

The afternoon ends. You pick up the letter and go home. As you come up the front walk, you notice the houses of your neighbors, almost identical to yours, one on each side. Your neighbors, close but not too close. You dismiss them, the Millers on the north, the Brents on the south. Both are young couples like you and Lynn. Possibly the State might assign two agents to work together, but never a man and a woman. Not living in the same house—not with children.

You show Lynn the letter as a curiosity. She reads it and laughs and throws it aside. You sit down to dinner. You think.

"You aren't eating, dear," Lynn says.

"Oh," you say. "I must have been thinking."

You eat. You try to act natural, but your mind will not rest. Colbert or Julie—Julie or Colbert.

After dinner, you sit and pretend to read. You think of every other person you know, but none of them fit. They have to be in a place when they can watch you. Colbert or Julie—Jilie or Colbert.

The evening drags on. Lynn yawns and rises, stretching. She is getting quite round in the belly.

"I get sleepy early these days," she says pleasantly.

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She goes into the bedroom to get ready. By unspoken agreement, you wait until she is in bed.

A little later, you follow, undressing in the bathroom and putting on your pajamas. When you enter the bedroom, it is dark. You can barely make out Lynn's pale face against the blackness of her hair, spread fanlike on the pillow. You slip into bed.

"Good night," Lynn says drowsily.

"Good night," you say.

Soon you know, by her steady breathing, that she is asleep. But you cannot sleep. Your life hangs on a slender thread of recognition.

Colbert or Julie—Julie or Colbert! Around and around they spin, the two faces, the weasel and the minx, blurring as they go faster and faster . . .

You jerk yourself awake. You cannot afford to sleep, not yet.

You hope that it is Colbert. You have never killed a woman. You do not think you would like it. And yet, Colbert is old for the role.

You will not use your carefully tutored powers. With an agent nearby, it would be almost certainly fatal. But there is always the identification under the armpit. If you can trick one of them into giving you a glimpse.

Colbert? Impossible! But you might be able to seduce Julie, or, perhaps, you need not go that far. If she is the agent . . . If not, then it is Colbert. Colbert or Julie—Julie or Colbert. One of the two is the stranger.

Now that you have decided on a course of action, you feel easier. You can sleep. You rise on one elbow and gently pull back a blind to look at your watch. It is midnight. The moonlight streams in brilliantly. It falls gently across Lynn's face.

You look at her. You have become quite fond of Lynn. Of all the things that you would miss, if you were caught and returned, you feel that you might miss Lynn most.

She has one white arm thrown up above her head. Her face is peaceful. Her body is working, even now, to build you the child that will provide the perfect camouflage. They would never suspect a man with a child.

You bend a little closer. The short sleeve of her thin nightgown has slipped down over her shoulder, leaving her arm bare.

Her armpit is smooth. But, just a little lower—is it shadow? No—it is a letter, and another letter, then a number. You decipher them—TA: 1-

Your breath whistles out of you. You look quickly at her face. Her eyes are open, staring into yours, wide and blue, deep with an awful knowledge.

"You!" you say hoarsely, and realize that you have given yourself away. But it doesn't matter.

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You have found the agent, and now it is between you two.

"Me," Lynn says.

You get up. You slip on a robe and go into the living room and sit down. You feel cold inside. You have been fond of Lynn.

In a moment, she follows, slipping her arms into a robe. She ties it high, above the swelling. You watch, scornfully.

"No sacrifice is too great," you say heavily. You want to hurt her, as she has hurt you.

Her eyes flash. "Not for the State."

"How did you find me?"

She laughs, derisively. "The great agent! So clever—so stupid! You had to have clothes and money. You had to return to the period of your last mission. All that was necessary was to get a job in the social security office, here, where it is easy to hide, and check the records. But I didn't even have to do that. You came walking into my arms."

Papers! You shake your head. They are what you had feared from the start. "But you were not sure. You couldn't be sure."

"No."

"Ah, the sacrifice!" you say. "It must have been torment to endure my lovemaking—all for the State."

Her eyes are fiery. "Yes." But her voice falters. "That is what kept me uncertain. I knew—and yet . . ."

"Ah!" you say.

Her face reddens to match her eyes. "Not what you think, animal. It seemed impossible that one born of the State, raised by the State, could turn beast so easily."

"And I never suspected," you say. "You are a consummate actress." You enjoy the look on her face, as she tries to decide whether you are being sarcastic. "You could not act, of course, before you were sure."

"Naturally," she says. "But now I am sure. I thought that you might remove my doubt by destroying the letter, but it is better this way. Enough of idle talk. You are coming with me."

You laugh, but laughter fades as she pulls a gun out of her robe pocket. It shoots solid pellets, but it is deadly enough. "Incredible," you say. She looks as if she enjoys the expression on your face. "I might have choked you to death in bed," you say, "but I couldn't. Now, perhaps, you can shoot me. You had better. I am not going back."

"Don't worry," she says grimly. "I'll shoot."

"Shoot now, then. Because if you don't, I am going to leave this era. Goodby, my dear."

"Don't be a fool!" she says. "I will follow you wherever you go. You have no chance now. You will only make it harder on yourself."

You smile. You start to laugh. "My dear," you say, chuckling,

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"you have forgotten one of the cardinal rules of time travel. You can take nothing with you from this era."

"Well," she says defiantly, but her expression is puzzled.

"Lynn, my dear," you say gently. "You have something which is always with you now, which will be with you for a number of months yet."

She looks down, startled. The gun drops from her hand. You scoop it up.

"Goodby, again," you say. But it is difficult to leave. Here, you have had rare moments of happiness. Memories clutch at you, hold you back. Where else will you be as happy?

Slowly Lynn's expression changes. Now it is her turn to laugh. "Go ahead," she taunts. "Leave. Go ahead and try!"

You stiffen. You try. You concentrate upon the time-stream with your sharpened time-sense. You sweat. But you cannot vary your temporal position by one fraction of a second.

"The great TA: 1-4537-A! They said that you were the most skillful, the cleverest, agent ever to work for the State. But you, also, can forget things. Remember, dear, the other cardinal rule of time-travel. You, too, can leave nothing behind." She sits down complacently smoothing her robe over her lap.

You begin to smile—you laugh. It is true. You are stuck here, both of you, for the rest of your lives.

"Now," she says, reaching for the telephone, "all I have to do is call—"

"I wouldn't," you say, still smiling, gesturing with the gun. "You can presume, perhaps, on my reluctance to kill you. But do not presume on the State's acceptance of your unorthodox condition. This time, you went too far for the State. Even if They are not horrified, They will not leave you here—alive. And you can never leave."

Her hand drops from the phone. You laugh. In a little while, you know, she will begin to laugh, too. It is, after all, a most amusing situation. You and Lynn and the little stranger. You have been too timid. Now that you have help you can be bolder. Somehow, you three, working together, will shift a fulcrum and remove the threat to your existence.

"What shall we call it?" you ask, sighing.

"Call *him!*" she says indignantly.

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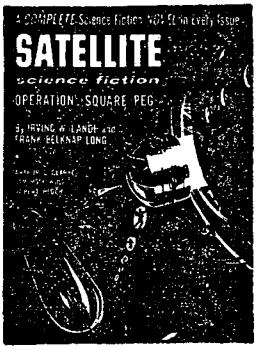
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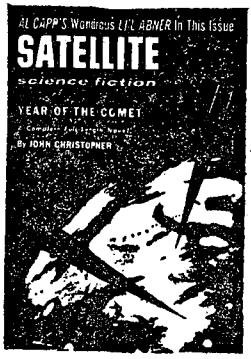

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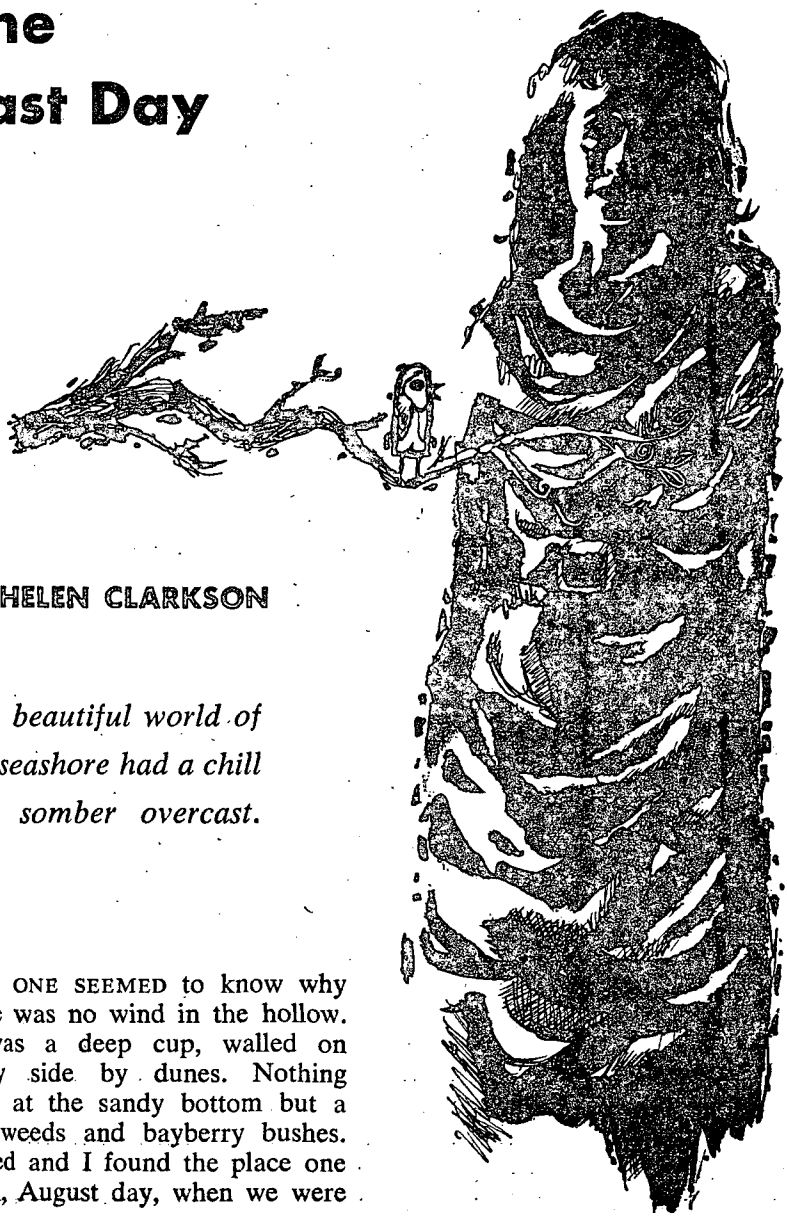
The Last Day



by HELEN CLARKSON

The beautiful world of the seashore had a chill and somber overcast.

No one seemed to know why there was no wind in the hollow. It was a deep cup, walled on every side by dunes. Nothing grew at the sandy bottom but a few weeds and bayberry bushes.

Ted and I found the place one brisk, August day, when we were

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walking along the top of the sand cliffs, looking at the wide, blue floor of ocean a hundred feet below. Up there, in wet bathing-suits, we were chilled by a nagging, little sea-breeze. But when we slid down the sloping side of the hollow, there was no wind at all—only peace and sunny stillness.

The dunes rose all around us like ramparts, blocking out the sea and the roofs of the fishing village that were just visible from the cliff top. It was secret as the bottom of a well. We could see nothing beyond but the sky, where white clouds drifted against soft blue. We vowed at once that we would never tell any other summer people about this discovery.

We lay on our backs, watching the beach-grass at the top, waving in the wind like long, green hair. Where we were, there was no wind at all. "Even the curls at the back of your neck are frozen," said Ted. "I wonder why?"

"Configuration," I said. "Like an echo. Chance has formed this hollow so the wind can't get into it."

"Watch that bird," said Ted.

He was a small, brown bird, his wings spread wide and motionless, planing down an air current like a tiny glider, but, when he came to the air above the hollow, he lost momentum suddenly and his wings began to flutter in flight. Once beyond the hollow, he glided again.

"See?" said Ted. "Even above the hollow, there's no wind. He couldn't glide over it. He had to fly."

"I never did like the wind," I said. "It's an enemy. In a monsoon mood, it can kill you. In its milder moments, as a mistral or a foehn, it can drive you mad by its sheer monotony."

"Women never like the wind because he's a rude lover," said Ted. "He musses their hair, lifts their skirts and plasters their dresses to their bodies."

We got back to the village at sunset. Ted stopped at the wharf to buy fish from old Captain Baldwin. "I know that hollow," said the Captain. "Never has been any wind there, even in my grandfather's day. He used to call it the Hurricane's Eye. Said it had the queer, sudden hush you notice when the heart of a hurricane is right overhead. Said he didn't believe there was any other spot quite like it anywhere else in the world. He ought to have known, for he'd been all over the world. He was in the China trade."

After supper in our rented cottage, we turned on the radio. Things had been sounding bad for a long, long time, but tonight they sounded worse than usual.

Some chief of civilian defense wound up the broadcast. He said

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the important thing was to keep calm, no matter what happened. And to stay in the cellar, if you had a cellar. We didn't.

"Be sure not to look back at any sudden, big flashes of light on the horizon," he warned. "And don't come out of your cellar until you hear the all-clear. No scientist knows exactly what will happen when bombs of this type are dropped in quantity, but remember—radio-active dust will be carried anywhere that the wind can go."

Ted turned off the radio. "Remember Lot's wife?"

"Not in detail."

"Sodom was punished for its sins by fire from Heaven. Lot received divine warning and left the city beforehand with his wife and daughters. They were warned not to look back. *Escape for thy life; look not behind thee . . . lest thou be consumed . . .* The very words have a strangely prophetic ring today. Of course Lot's wife did look back and she was turned into a pillar of salt."

"I've been hearing about these bombs for a long time," I said. "But they will never be dropped. For the same reason that they never used poison gas in the second war: no one can tell beforehand just which way the wind will blow."

We were both wakeful that night. About two in the morning we saw the vast, insane flash, bright as sunlight, on the horizon. There was no time to look away. I shut my eyes, but I heard Ted jump up and pull down the shades. Later we felt a shock and heard a rumbling, like an earthquake. It was far away. The house trembled, but stood. And that was all, except that when we turned on the radio we couldn't get anything.

The village had never looked more peaceful than it did in the morning sunshine, but there was quite a high wind that kicked the blue surface of the bay into sparkling, wavelets and filled the sails of the fishing fleet, as it rounded the point, coming in with a dawn catch.

"Got plenty of food here anyway," said Captain Baldwin.

Nobody said anything just then about radioactivity.

There were no newspapers that morning and no truck deliveries from the outside world. No weekend tourists came cruising up the road in cars choked with children and dogs and daddy's best suit swinging on a coat-hanger. Nobody could get anything on radio or TV. Half the village had cars, but no one seemed to feel like driving down to the nearest town.

We all felt it was up to them to get news and supplies to us. But after two whole days had passed and still there was no word, Captain Baldwin got out his battered Ford and chugged down the highway. People who had families

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elsewhere gave him messages to take to the telegraph office. *Say we're all right. Say everything is fine here.*

He was back in an hour. There was no telegraph office. There was no town. Only rubble. No one volunteered to go farther afield.

"We were self-contained in pioneering days," said the Captain. "We can be self-contained again. We have farms and fishing boats. What more does anybody want?"

Villagers and summer people were drawn together now, like refugees on a raft, with a sort of false cheerfulness that masked panic. Only the doctor was grave. He was watching the flag on the village green as it rattled in the high wind.

"They've got too much to do out there to worry about us," said the clergyman. "We'll just take care of ourselves and hope for the best until they're able to get things organized and get in touch with us again. You've plenty of medicines, haven't you, doctor?"

"Plenty of aspirin and penicillin," he answered, but I knew he was thinking of things that aspirin and penicillin couldn't cure.

There never was a more lovely summer. Just enough rain to keep things green. One golden day after another, as if earth was trying to say to us: *See how lovely I can be? Won't you be sorry to leave me?*

But we had no time to think. There was so much to be done if we were to have food for the winter.

In September the lease on our cottage was up, but no one cared. The owner had been in New York in August, when we last heard from him. Now we had no idea what had become of him.

One morning the little rosebush in our garden put out a single, improbable rose, quite out of season. It was an old-fashioned rose, deliciously fragrant and white, with the faintest blush of pink around its golden heart. Ted touched the silken petals with his fingertips and said gently: "The last rose of . . . the last summer." That night the rose bush died though it was too early for frost.

The sea gulls were the next to go. We woke one morning to a stench of dead birds. They were heaped along the wharves, some floating in the water. Next it was the songbirds and little woods animals. I hadn't realized how many songbirds there were, but now I noticed the silence in the garden, especially at dawn and dusk. Finches and robins, hares and squirrels had ranged farther afield and nibbled less discriminately than we.

A great many of us were living largely on canned food now. After the gulls died, no one dared to eat fish and the fleet stayed in port.

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People were beginning to be afraid of eggs and milk, so no one minded very much when the cows and chickens died.

Finally the slow, secret rot spread to human beings. First, the children, one by one, until mothers moved through the village numb or mad with shock. Then the rest of us.

Ted and Captain Baldwin were the last of the survivors to be stricken. The old Captain went quickly, but Ted lingered, going blind before he died. Why, we didn't know. There was no one to ask. The doctor had died long ago.

There came a cold, bright day in early winter when I was the only living thing in the village and its surrounding farms. Not a cricket chirped. Not even an ant crawled after the sugar I had spilled on the kitchen floor. There was only the earth itself and the sunlight and the wind that had never really ceased blowing since the bombs fell.

I wondered about the life I couldn't see—the viruses and germs. Had cholera and influenza died with the race they preyed upon? Was the whole earth now clinically sterile?

I remembered then the hollow Ted and I had found in August. It was too small to hold even one person with the food he would need for the winter, so we had not considered it as a possible refuge. But now I wanted to see it once again, so I walked out of the village, alone, as I would be now until the day of my own death.

From the top of the sand cliff I saw again the wide, blue floor of ocean, rippled like watered silk by the skimming wings of the wind. An ocean where there were no longer fish or clams or algae or anything alive. A dead sea on a dead planet.

I came to the hollow and slid down its sandy side to the bottom. Once again I lay on my back and watched white clouds drift across a soft blue sky, but there were no gulls now diving and gliding down air currents. I closed my eyes and tried to pretend that the last few months had never happened, that this was August, that Ted would soon come to the rim of the hollow with a lunch-basket full of fried chicken and an ice bucket of Chablis and we would feast in the sun and then walk back to the village for a supper of fresh fish and turn on the radio to get some music and hear the news of the world . . .

But I couldn't make myself believe it. The world was dead. There would never be any news again. I was alone here, perhaps alone in the whole world, and I wouldn't be alive much longer.

The world had died as Sodom died for its sins. Not sins of sensuality, but sins of pride and intolerance and cruelty. *Thou shalt*

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not kill. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. The command had been clear and simple for nearly two thousand years, but it had not been obeyed.

I was startled out of my wits by a rustling of leaves. Had the wind reached the hollow at last and stirred the bayberry bushes? Or was there one other of God's creatures alive in this vacuum? I opened my eyes. I saw nothing, but I heard a clear, sweet trill of song and then I saw him—the small, brown bird, perched, swaying, on a twig of bayberry.

The hollow that was too small to shield and feed a human being had shielded and fed one small bird. He must have found it by chance, or instinct, before it was too late and he had stayed long enough to survive until now, living on the seeds and berries that grew here uncontaminated by the wicked wind.

One bird alone, without a mate or a nest of eggs—the last bird of all singing to the last human being.

I sat and listened while he poured forth the most joyous song I have ever heard, as if he, too, had been lonely, as if he, too, were glad to see me. I could almost hear words: *Isn't it lovely? The sun, the sea, the sky, the sand? Hasn't God been good to give us all this?*

As I listened to his innocent joy, slowly, for the first time since the bombs fell, tears began to slip down my cheeks. For I was not innocent. I shared the guilt of all my species.

After a while I lay down to sleep in the only place in the whole world that was clean and windless.

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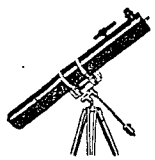

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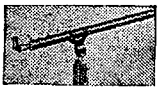

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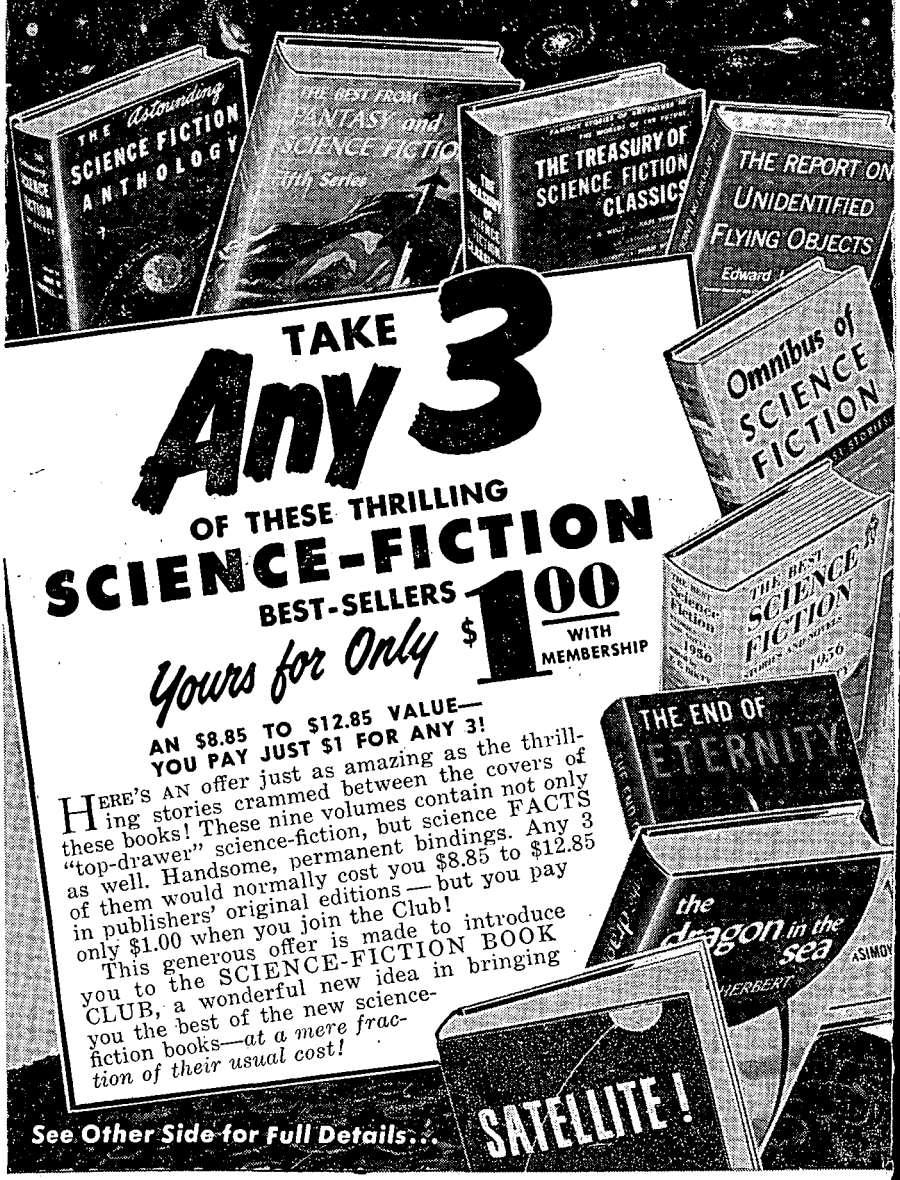

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